

# RURAL QUALITY OF LIFE

Edited by Pia Heike Johansen,  
Anne Tietjen, Evald Bundgård Iversen,  
Henrik Lauridsen Lolle and Jens Kaae Fisker

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## Foreword

Rural areas are often associated with high quality of life. Fresh air. Open space. Children running free. The impressionistic imagery is familiar and inviting. People visit rural places to relax, recuperate, wander and play. People move to rural places to slow down and follow dreams. Open a glossy lifestyle magazine and there, doubtless, will be a rustic home, replete with sweeping views and worn-in furnishings – and as near to some deep and comforting sense of homeliness as it is far from financial reach.

Rural areas are regularly associated with decline, too. Rural studies researchers warn of the ‘vicious cycle’ following job loss and service closure. Shuttered shops and shrinking villages. Withered opportunities. ‘Anyone with “get up and go” got up and went’, the saying goes. Even picturesque places mask histories pocked with poverty. The less picturesque – like former mining villages, surrounded by overgrown slag heaps and bits of rusted machinery – are tidied from the tourist trail and categorised as ‘left behind’.

Forty years ago, the Welsh cultural theorist Raymond Williams observed that rurality is not a neutral category, but laden with contemporary social and political meaning. Because rural space becomes defined more in relation to urban centres than according to any objective or intrinsic characteristics, then what the city *is*, the countryside *is not* (and vice versa). This explains why rural places, despite considerable diversity, are so often portrayed in broad, one-or-the-other terms: idyll *or* ignorance; satisfaction *or* suffering; close to nature *or* stuck in the past. Such simplified stories are mobilised for many purposes, from moralistic commentary and cultural critique to leveraging resources. To speak of rurality is inevitably to speak volumes.

Rural is especially laden because urbanisation has become a metonym for modernity. Though cities have been with us for millennia, accelerating urban growth is a relatively recent trend, accompanying industrialisation, colonisation and globalisation. The United Kingdom census first reported more urban than rural dwellers in 1851. In 2007, the United Nations

estimated that the global population had reached the majority urban milestone. For some 55 per cent of people worldwide and over 70 per cent of Europeans, cities define the ways ‘we’ live now. Rurality, remembering Williams, represents the ways ‘we’ – fewer and fewer of us – do *not* live. To speak of rural quality of life speaks volumes indeed.

Plenty of commentators posit urbanisation as modernity’s triumph. Cities are celebrated for driving growth, incubating innovation, clustering creativity and recently even for saving us from climate change. Academic articles present urban agglomeration as an economic axiom and policies turn ‘city-regions’ into a *fait accompli*. Yet doubts nag. Urbanisation, many interjecting voices say, is an experiment on an unprecedented scale – and experiments are wont to fail.

Despite optimistic promises of everlasting progress, melancholic strands weave through modernity, too. What if we are erasing our heritage? What if we are sapping our souls in the city for things shallow and base? What if we went back to slower, simpler, greener ways of being? What if we cannot? What if we will not?

These are not new questions. Read one of the nineteenth-century romantics, or play a 1970s Anglophone folk record, and the questions hum between the lines. But nor are the doubts limited to sandal-wearing lyricists. In a now classic study, American economist Richard Easterlin showed that national happiness levels do not increase over time, even as incomes continue to grow. Easterlin’s paradox continues to be cited as evidence that economic growth alone is a poor proxy for real human flourishing. Perhaps chasing big city salaries from small high-rise offices really does leave us feeling, as anthropologist Karen Ho put it in her ethnography of Wall Street, *liquidated*.

The multiple crises of our recent times have given long lingering doubts new impetus. The 2008 global financial crisis ushered in state austerity budgets that bit at everyday life even as the ‘too big to fail’ banking sector bounced back to healthy profits. Despite (some) soul-searching in business and policy circles, economist Mariana Mazzucato astutely argues that our economic paradigm remains locked in the false belief that price *is* value, rather than value determining price. Societal value has taken on a new perspective during the COVID-19 pandemic: the ‘key workers’ we have most depended upon typically rank among the lowest paid and otherwise least regarded. Meanwhile, climate change adds uncomfortable urgency to conversations about what counts and why. Will recovery truly prioritise well-being – today, tomorrow and for future generations – or stick with limited measures of macroeconomic ‘success’?

If the pandemic represents a reset, little wonder that rural lifestyles seem so central to the story. Lockdown restrictions and lessons at home have made paved streets and poky apartments seem a lot less attractive. Digital



technologies have decoupled many professionals from day on day in the office, affording opportunities not only to work from home, but for home to be further away. Living rurally is becoming more possible and more practical, just as the countryside is once again serving as a foil to city problems. The lives fewer of us have been able to live increasingly look like the lives more of us might want to. What if we went back to slower, simpler, greener ways of being? What if we can? What if we do?

*Rural Quality of Life* is a timely book that takes up classic questions. It is also a book that *asks* many questions. Subjective well-being surveys are often cited as proof that rural dwellers are, overall, happier than their urban counterparts. But surveys say little about why, and even less about what such results mean in practical terms. The chapters assembled here add much-needed breadth and nuance from a variety of perspectives, contexts and methods. Some chapters are consoling. Others are troubling. There are few simple answers – thankfully, because few real rural stories are simple either.

I vividly remember sitting in an undergraduate class (more years ago than I might like to admit), a kindly professor asking us to turn to the person next to us and chat about our childhood summer holidays. Had we been camping? Perhaps we travelled in a caravan to a scenic rural spot? I had spent many happy days in a caravan on the outskirts of a small horticultural town, whirling around outside in the sunshine with the grass tickling my toes and my fingers sticky from fresh-picked fruit. But I never went on holiday. My mother and I lived, for a time, in a caravan parked in my grandparents' garden because we had nowhere else to go. I remember slipping quietly from the classroom that day, cringing in the recognition that I had the 'wrong' rural story to tell and that telling it would mark me as out-of-place in urban, affluent academic life.

The older, wiser version of myself knows how to speak up. And speak up I do about good lives and spatial justice. My own copy of *Rural Quality of Life* will soon be dog-eared and sometimes thumped. My hope is that fellow readers will find in the book a rich and challenging resource for speaking up in their own ways and for speaking – critical, complex – volumes about rural places, people and futures.

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# 1

## Introducing rural quality of life

*Pia Heike Johansen, Jens Kaae Fisker, Henrik Lauridsen Lolle,  
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### **The rural–urban happiness paradox**

In 2018 the Danish philanthropic foundation Realdania conducted a survey asking 7,090 people about their satisfaction with life. Confirming prior suspicions, the survey showed that rural dwellers in communities with fewer than 200 inhabitants more frequently reported a high quality of life (82 per cent) than both the national average (76.8 per cent) and even more so when compared to Copenhagen residents (74.7 per cent) (Realdania, 2018). In a bid to explain these results and explore their wider implications, the foundation convened a multidisciplinary group of researchers for a four-year research project. This book is one of the outcomes of that project. Instead of just reporting findings from our research in the Danish countryside, however, we have commissioned chapters from international colleagues in Europe, North America, Africa, Asia and Australia. We have taken this step because the general tendency in the survey results just mentioned are far from unique. Similar patterns crop up in a range of related studies conducted in recent years, most notably in the 2020 *World Happiness Report*. In a chapter on rural–urban happiness differentials, the report concludes that rural residents in Northern and Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand generally tend to be happier than their urban counterparts (Burger et al., 2020). Similar findings have been reported in country-level studies and broader regional research, especially in Europe (e.g. Sørensen, 2014).

Such findings go against conventional wisdom in the field and represent something of a conundrum to researchers and policymakers alike: the rural–urban happiness paradox. This was the puzzle that our Danish team of researchers set out to solve in 2018. Our results are now ready to enter into critical dialogue with those of international colleagues engaged in answering the same kind of questions. Why are rural dwellers apparently happier than urban dwellers? Have the proponents of urban triumphalism got it all wrong? What *is* rural quality of life and is it the same in all places and for all groups? Can happiness actually be measured, how can it be

done, and should we be doing it at all? What do the results we get mean and is more happiness always a good thing? How do we address situations where one group's happiness is premised on the misery of another? How can planning and policy-making support general well-being in ways that are socially and spatially just? The importance of answering such questions has increased as we find ourselves in times of unprecedented political polarisation, especially across the rural–urban divide, most recently exemplified by the 2020 US election. Moreover, the issues at stake reach far into the ranks of academia, where the countryside continues to be viewed with a predominantly urban gaze which tends to reproduce flawed assumptions about supposedly inherent differences between rural and urban areas and the people who live there. Part of the book's mission is to challenge such assumptions as a prerequisite to coming up with adequate answers to the puzzle posed by the rural–urban happiness paradox. As such, the book makes an important intervention not just in its primary academic fields – rural studies and quality-of-life studies – but also more widely in academia and policy circles. The complexity of the task means that a multidisciplinary outlook is needed. This is reflected in the structure of the book, whose four parts are comprised by cross-cutting perspectives from particular disciplinary vantage points.

### **Quality of life beyond the rural–urban binary**

In most of the studies that form the basis of the rural–urban happiness paradox, place of residence is the variable used for spatial differentiation – sometimes in a simple rural–urban binary and sometimes by way of a more nuanced rural–urban continuum. A continuum does not, however, do away with the binary. It only 'softens' it up by adding a range of intermediary positions between the poles. Hence, the use of a continuum cannot – on its own – be used as a vehicle to take us beyond the rural–urban binary. In other words, whether the measured quality of life of a given individual gets to count as rural or urban is based entirely on a spatial parcelisation which does not necessarily say all that much about the kind of life that person lives. The fact that your current place of residence happens to be located in an area somehow demarcated as rural does not automatically mean that you live a rural life. The same can be said about an urban place of residence: we cannot assume that rural lives are not being lived in the heart of the city. In fact, numerous studies within both urban and rural studies convincingly portray many instances of both urban life in the countryside (e.g. Woods, 2019) and rural life in the city (e.g. Gillen, 2016; Yeboah et al., 2019).

So, we need to be aware that there is no necessary equivalence or correspondence between, on the one hand, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as bases for spatial parcelisation, and on the other, ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as designators of different ways of life. Having said this, it would of course make little sense to talk about *rural quality of life* at all if we did not believe that rural and urban had some merit as markers of socio-spatial differentiation. Indeed, we would not be writing this book if we thought these terms should rather be eliminated as meaningful analytical distinctions. They can and do serve meaningful purposes, but only if we can leave behind the binary baggage with which they arrive at the scene. Now, the recent popularisation in critical urban studies of the *planetary urbanisation* thesis would have us believe that the rural ‘has now been thoroughly engulfed within the variegated patterns and pathways of a planetary formation of urbanization’ (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p. 174). This way of superseding the rural–urban binary has the benefit of highlighting how urbanisation processes reach far beyond the city and cut deeply into the rural fabric to an extent where life in the countryside is being substantially conditioned by urbanisation. As argued by Michael Woods (2019, p. 626), however, it also ‘downplays the enduring cultural significance of rural identity’ and largely disregards ‘the continuation of “ruralisation” as a countervailing dynamic articulated in trends such as back-to-the-land migration, repeasantisation and urban agriculture’.

Even if the urban as a way of life overflows the city, the countryside does not disappear and neither does the rural. What we get instead is a hybridisation, where the rural also overflows the countryside. We may talk about urban countrysides, but then we should also be talking about rural cities (Jazeel, 2018; Gillen, 2016; Yeboah et al., 2019; Mercer, 2017). As argued by Gillen (2016, p. 335), ‘bringing the countryside to the city does not deprive either rural or urban space of their meanings but complicates and transforms established understandings of the rural–urban binary, rural–urban relationality, rural-to-urban migration (im)mobility and urban citizenship’. To avoid reproducing and reinforcing rural–urban binaries it is important that the complications arising from such a hybrid outlook are kept alive rather than simplified or reduced away in the search for neat and operational theoretical frameworks. Rural quality of life cannot be reduced to quality of life in the countryside, nor to quality of life in non-urban places. We must take a more difficult route if we wish to make any real advances. The rural–urban happiness paradox tells us about a spatial differentiation in quality of life that mainstream social science cannot readily explain – in fact it tends to expect the opposite. But in responding, we need to always be ready to question the spatial differentiation that forms the basis of the paradox: the rural–urban binary itself. Binary thinking tends to

entrench debate in camps based on false opposites. Perhaps this is to blame for the recent debacle unfolding between Edward Glaeser's claims about the triumph of the city and Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn's counterclaims about the triumph of the countryside (see the framing essay in [Part IV](#) for a full account of this debate).

### **Quality of life as subjective well-being, life satisfaction and happiness**

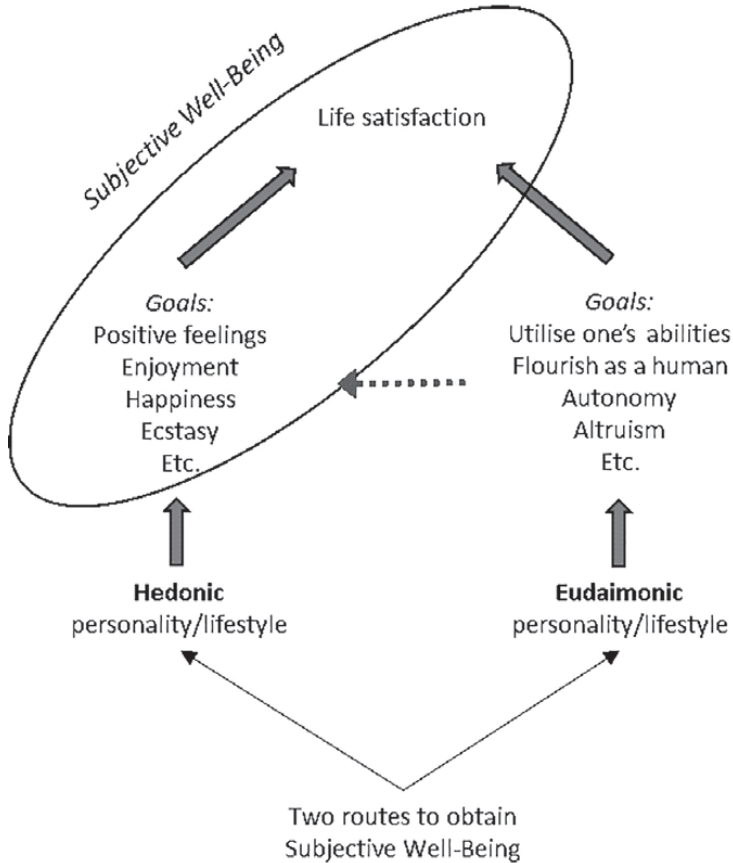
What we refer to as 'quality of life' covers a range of more specific terms – objective well-being, subjective well-being, life satisfaction happiness, etc. – each carrying its own connotations attached to different research fields, methods and theoretical underpinnings. When we started putting together this book, we were deliberately agnostic about the relative merit of these terms. But this also means that we have some explaining to do in order to enable the reader to make sense of it all. Precise use of the different terms is important, especially when dealing with approaches that try to measure quality of life. The best way of introducing this properly is to give a brief, but far from exhaustive, overview of how the field has evolved.

Traditionally, that is since the development of national accounting systems after the great depression in the 1920s and up through the twentieth century, researchers, policymakers and others used economic measures like GDP and income to compare levels of welfare or quality of life (Faik, 2015). From around the middle of the twentieth century, a pronounced critique of the one-sided economic focus on welfare led to what has been called 'the social indicators' movement' (Land, 2015). Different types of welfare indicators were being measured in order to evaluate and compare countries and other geographical areas. Still, these measures were mostly objectively assessed factors like the size of people's homes in square meters, having a toilet, a bath, a television, a washing machine, a job and so on. However, gradually policymakers and researchers began to focus also on subjectively assessed measures of quality of life (see, for instance, Easterlin, 1995; Diener, 1984; Veenhoven, 2017). The subjective measures approach to well-being has the advantage that it is directly related to the agent's evaluation and feelings, and that it is not left to experts alone to decide what goods should be included in the measurements and what weights should be given each of these. The argument is that the conventional economic, or behaviourist, approach where individual choices and preferences are measured, cannot infer the well-being outcome from these choices. At least this is the case when there is only one overall measure of subjective well-being like, for instance, overall happiness. The subjective approach also takes account

of two kinds of bounded rationality: ‘first, individuals may make choices that are not consistent with their goal system in place. Second, their goals and evaluations (“tastes”) may change over time in a way that is unforeseen at the time that their choices will reflect neither their true desires nor their achieved satisfaction’ (Hirschauer et al., 2015, pp. 650–651). The subjective approach tries to measure the outcome directly, thereby overcoming these inherent problems in the objective measures or behaviourist approach.

For decades, researchers have discussed the definition and measuring of the concept of *subjective well-being*. In general, the concept has been understood to consist of two main dimensions, an *emotional* dimension, concerning affects, and a *cognitive, evaluating* dimension. The emotional dimension is also termed the *hedonic* dimension, discussed in Greek philosophy by Aristippus, but often it is associated with the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham and with *utilitarianism*. The aim for the researcher here is to measure the respondent’s mood. In the cognitive, evaluating dimension, one expects that the respondent, before answering the survey question, uses some cognitive effort (Krosnick, 1991) in evaluating his or her life, that is, to ‘review and retrieve all relevant aspects of their lives’ (Yan et al., 2014, p. 101). Survey researchers have measured the emotional and the cognitive dimensions in numerous ways, both with single-item and multiple-item scales (Veenhoven, 2017). However, in most surveys, one measures subjective well-being with just one or two single items, concerning respectively *happiness* and *life satisfaction*. Many researchers consider happiness questions to measure primarily the emotional, hedonic dimension, and life satisfaction questions to measure primarily the cognitive, evaluating dimension, while others look at these questions as more or less interchangeable measures of overall subjective well-being (Gundelach & Kreiner, 2004).

As an alternative to, or in combination with, the above-mentioned two dimensions, some researchers work with a distinction between *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* well-being. Eudaimonic well-being, like hedonic well-being, has its roots in Greek philosophy, where Aristotle’s texts contain a strong critique of striving after hedonic happiness. Instead, one ought to find happiness in self-fulfilment or *virtue*, for instance to be altruistic, to realise one’s potential, to engage in social and political life and to act autonomously. Happiness is in this way seen more as a by-product of virtue (Haybron, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2008). One can also combine the distinctions by stating that there are two dimensions of subjective well-being, the hedonic and the cognitive, evaluating dimension, and furthermore we have two routes to the fulfilment of both, as shown in Figure 1.1. With a hedonic lifestyle or personality, one strives directly after the outcome – enjoyment, happiness, etc. With a eudaimonic lifestyle or personality, on the contrary, one strives to act in accordance with one’s inner self, towards what one finds important



**Figure 1.1** The concept subjective well-being and two different routes to this end. (Source: Lolle & Andersen [2019]. With inspiration from, among others, Veenhoven [2015]; Huta & Ryan [2010]).

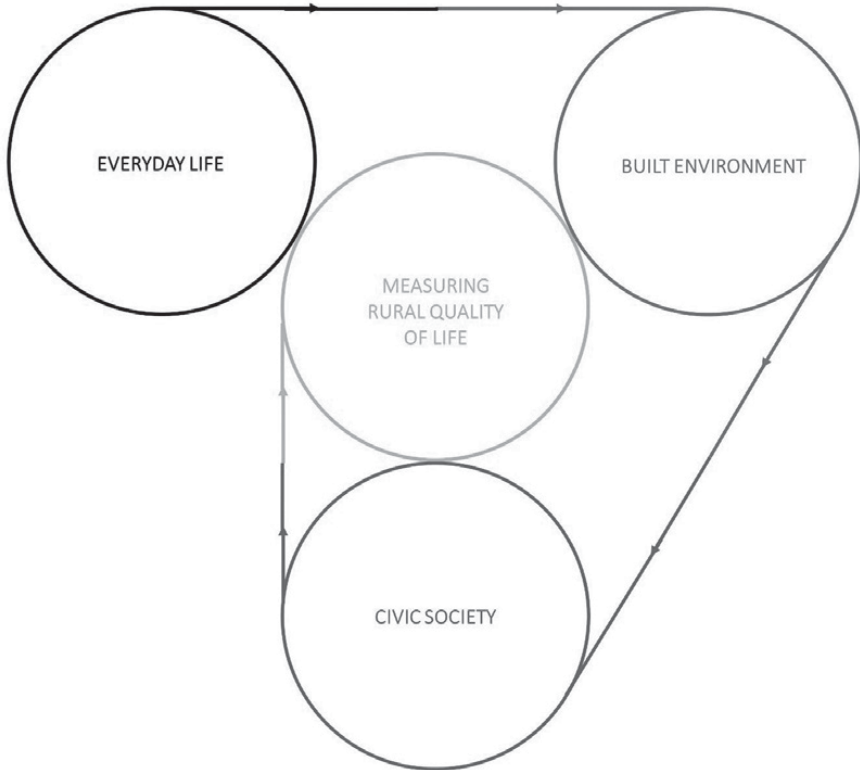
and morally right, though not in accordance with some specific ethical rule-set like in deontological ethics. In the study of subjective well-being, researchers more and more often take notice of eudaimonia in some way. In quantitative studies, researchers can do this by including measures for eudaimonic personality or eudaimonic goals, like acting autonomously, as either dependent or independent variables.

Of course, most people are not completely either hedonic or eudaimonic in their lifestyle, but rather include aspects of both, and as [Figure 1.1](#) shows, living an altogether eudaimonic lifestyle probably also affects feelings of enjoyment and happiness, not just the satisfaction with one's life. For these

reasons, for most people there will be a significant overlap between feelings of enjoyment, happiness, etc. on the one hand and life satisfaction on the other. Some researchers also consider measures of happiness and life satisfaction to be so closely related that they use them interchangeably.

### Structure of the book

Instead of simply continuing along these well-trodden paths, we wanted the book to break new ground by looking at the field in different ways, not only from within but also from without. We start, therefore, by taking a sizeable step back to pose the basic question anew: what is rural quality of life actually about and how is it enabled and hindered? The first three parts ([Figure 1.2](#)) attend to these questions from the point of view of different research fields: rural sociology in [Part I](#), rural planning



**Figure 1.2** Structure and progression of the book.



in [Part II](#) and civil society studies in [Part III](#). Only then do we return in [Part IV](#) to the field whose basic history was outlined in the section above. The following subsections provide a brief introduction to the four parts. In addition to this, each part opens with a framing essay, providing the reader with the context needed to read the individual chapters as a collected whole. These essays vary in length and structure because each part entails different needs. For instance, the framing essay in [Part IV](#) is longer than the others because a much more thorough introduction to the field with which authors engage is needed.

### *Everyday life*

The first part of the book takes nothing for granted and sidesteps the urban gaze by entering everyday rural life itself to ask a basic question: what *is* quality of life in the countryside? Quantitative quality of life indicators do not tell the whole story and are only as reliable as the assumptions that went into making them in the first place. We put such assumptions aside here in order to begin the book by questioning the very foundations of the field. The aim is to reappraise and take seriously the lived experience of rural dwellers in order that we may raise awareness, also among planners and policymakers, about the fact that good-intentioned efforts to improve rural quality of life do not necessarily always align with reality on the ground. Moreover, we want to highlight and come to terms with the unsettling possibility that in some rural places high levels of subjective well-being may be predicated on demographic segregation and the exclusion or absence of specific ‘others’. If this is true, should it be a cause for celebration or concern? How do we deal with the very real danger that such findings may be used to promote and justify racial and cultural segregation and the homogenisation of communities?

These are tough and important questions that can only be answered rigorously by immersing our research endeavours in the messy realities of rural life. We have tasked our contributors and ourselves with doing so. The result is a collection of chapters which generate important insights into the kinds of everyday performances, practices, mechanisms of power and rhythms through which real and imagined notions of a rural lifestyle are maintained, reproduced and reinvented. In-depth knowledge on these matters allows our authors to get closer to properly grounded notions about what rural quality of life is, what it can be, how it is hindered and how it is enabled. It also allows us to critically assess the intricate dynamics involved in the production of winners and losers in terms of human well-being, including how they are gendered and racialised, but also how they relate to questions of class and other axes of difference.

*Built environment*

In the second part of the book, chapter authors investigate built interventions in rural places made by local communities, planners, architects and policymakers and driven by aims that explicitly emphasise quality of life. Do such interventions actually fulfil their purpose, and if so, how? If not, why do they fail? Under which circumstances do they become counterproductive and why? Chapters also explore how the implications of built interventions are often two-sided, with the physical changes to the material rural fabric comprising only the most obviously visible side.

Often, however, the other side is just as important: the processes and projects through which built interventions come about reach much further into the social fabric of communities. In this sense, the interventions under scrutiny are not merely concerned with the material environment of rural places but also intervene in the goings-on of everyday rural life that comprised the topic in [Part I](#) of the book. The combination of findings from [parts I](#) and [II](#) thus allows us to provide a more informed basis for future rural planning and policy-making. This includes not only questions of *how* to intervene, but also the overlooked question of *when not* to intervene; as disruptions, interventions cannot be assumed to always be beneficial. What we have tasked authors with, then, is to critically scrutinise the ways in which interventions instigate new relationships between people, things and places. A key question that this entails is by and for whom are rural spaces of well-being created, and who is being overlooked or excluded in their production? This, again, harks back to the critical framing of [Part I](#).

*Civil society*

The third part of the book turns attention to the relation between organised civil society and rural quality of life. In a variety of ways and settings, chapter authors put to the test the assumption that a viable and vigorous civil society with strong local associations tends to be conducive to enhanced quality of life. If rural people are happier, so the argument goes, then it is due to the strong community attachments created by higher levels of civil society participation in rural areas. Is this really true, and if so, what are the underlying mechanisms that make it so? Under which circumstances, and exactly how, is a strong civil society conducive to improving quality of life? What about non-participants and patterns of systematic exclusion from organised civil society? And what should policymakers and other stakeholders learn from all of this?

Now, the conditions for civil society for having viable and strong local associations have changed, and there is no longer any strict interdependence

between working life, public institutions and civil society. Likewise, it would also seem to matter a great deal what kinds of organised civil society tend to be predominant in different areas; for instance, a sports club and a religious association entail different modes of participation and have different implications in the everyday lives of participants. Some associations are largely inward-oriented, with activities that concern only their own members, whereas others attempt to embrace the community at large. This also serves to highlight the issues of exclusion and segregation that were also taken up in parts I and II. These are just as pertinent here. These and other axes of differentiation in organised civil society need to be taken into account if we are to step beyond simplistic explanations which hide more than they reveal about the role of civil society in the production of geographic differences in quality of life.

### *Measuring rural quality of life*

From the perspective of a quantitative research approach, the – often much politicised – debate about quality of life in the countryside vis-à-vis the city has been investigated in myriad ways. The conceptualisation and operationalisation of both the independent variable measuring rural and urban areas and the dependent variable measuring quality of life is not at all straightforward. Findings presented in parts I through III should make it abundantly clear that the task of measuring and mapping quality of life is a very complicated matter. Authors in the fourth and final part of the book nevertheless take up this task and present quantitatively informed studies of differences in quality of life between the city and the countryside, using either international or national data sets. Although previous research is plentiful, important gaps still exist, while a heap of methodological challenges await to be dealt with. Our authors have been tasked with addressing both the gaps and the challenges.

The other task that we take on is to sort out some of the methodological challenges that account for our current cautiousness in arriving at clear conclusions. A host of methods have been developed, including objective and subjective well-being, happiness, positive and negative affect and so forth. Each comes with its own advantages, blind-spots, limitations and methodological challenges. This is one reason that the conclusions have been quite diverse. Another reason is the overall research design of studies. Some focus on differences per se, while others focus more on causal factors or qualities attached to the macro level, i.e. rural or urban area. Yet another reason for the disparate results is that the difference in quality of life is heterogeneous across countries, hence the need for more country-level studies mentioned above. What chapters in this part of the book seek, then, is

(1) to make clear what these methods are actually measuring; (2) to provide a more nuanced picture of current trends in rural–urban quality of life differentials; and (3) to reveal some of the factors that may explain those trends. The chapters deliver new insights into previously understudied areas such as the role of urban–rural and rural–urban migration, age group or life phase differences and in-depth country-level case studies.

### Rural well-being for all?

The cross-cutting viewpoints presented in the book make it clear that rural quality of life is no simple matter. Moreover, the problems it raises reach way beyond the subject matter narrowly defined. They connect to some of the most pertinent challenges faced collectively by humanity today, while also raising important questions about the role and agency of academia broadly defined. The rural–urban axis of differentiation has emerged as a key aspect in current processes of polarisation, and we cannot dismiss the concerning possibility that academic practices have been complicit through the ways we construct and reproduce the rural–urban divide. As the very title of the book suggests, we cannot claim innocence in this regard. Nevertheless, we want to use this intervention as an occasion to reflect on such complicity and to take remediating steps. Rurality and urbanity are two sides of the same coin, and as such are better grasped dialectically than dualistically. In an academic community where the urban gaze predominates, the decision to adopt a rural perspective is an act of seeking to balance the scales. Doing so is as much an opportunity to learn something new about the urban as it is about demystifying the rural. We wish the book to be read in this light.

It is easy to call for a future which affords well-being for all, but coming to terms with what this entails, and what it might be taken to mean, is a completely different and immensely more complicated task. A recurring theme in the book is the critical question of whose well-being, whose quality of life gets to count, and whether enhanced well-being for some might come at the cost of deteriorating well-being for others. When we talk about well-being and quality of life in this way, we are actually talking about something more specific: *human* well-being and *human* quality of life. Living through a climate emergency and a major extinction event, it is becoming increasingly obvious that we cannot afford the luxury of restricting ourselves to this narrow view. Non-human well-being and the quality of non-human life have to be seen to matter as well. A rural perspective is instructive in this regard because it serves to centre attention more squarely on human–environment relations. The timeliness of such a perspective is furthermore enhanced by an ongoing shift in policy attention, where well-being is being

pushed as a key policy target, a pivotal component of an alternative ‘bottom line’ against which policy efficacy may be evaluated. GDP is no longer the taken-for-granted proxy for development that it used to be, most notably illustrated by the introduction and widespread adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Putting together an edited volume on quality of life in the year 2020 – when the process started – would seem incomplete and out of touch without addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Several chapters put this topic front and centre by analysing the sudden changes it has wrought on everyday life and on how quality of life is perceived. Something else, however, has been notable as well: cities are ideal places for a virus to spread, thus adding new allure to the possibility of a life in the countryside for urban dwellers. In this sense, the pandemic means that rural quality of life attains renewed attention and perceived attractiveness – at least for a while. It remains to be seen whether this will prompt increased urban–rural migration and renewed efforts to ruralise urban life. On the other hand, many of the countermeasures that governments implemented to contain and halt the spread of the virus were designed primarily with densely populated areas in mind. Nevertheless, they were often rolled out indiscriminately, with the same restrictions being applied in sparsely populated areas, where they sometimes seemed ridiculous and therefore provoked a rural backlash. In this way, the pandemic seems to be simultaneously exacerbating and ameliorating polarisation along the rural–urban axis. In any case, COVID-19 has become an eye-opening disruption that only heightens the timeliness of the discussions in this book.

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# Part I

Everyday life





# Framing essay I

*Pia Heike Johansen, Jens Kaae Fisker and Martin Phillips*

## Introduction

Historically, everyday rural life was characterised by the near absence of a division between work and leisure (Morse et al., 2014). Place attachment and community-based identities grew out of a shared set of rhythms and practices which also gave shape to rural landscapes and sociability. Rural dwellers, in this sense, were key producers of the places in which they lived and worked (Bennett, 2015; Lefebvre, 2004). Today, less work is agricultural or forestry-related and the everyday lives of most rural dwellers in the global North are punctuated by some form of work–leisure division. Between then and now – and complicating matters – the early days of the tourism industry saw the manufacturing of a pastoral ideal of idyllic rural places which served to commodify rural space, first for tourism and later for settlement (Brown, 2016; Darling, 2005).

This complex historical background, with all its local and regional variations, needs to be taken into account if we wish to properly understand what rural quality of life is all about. Contemporary rural life can be tinged by this heritage in several ways. Most importantly, the ideal of leading an independent rural lifestyle where one is actively involved in the creation of landscapes and community sociability is widely maintained and reproduced (Farmer, 2020; Wallis, 2017; Chueh & Lu, 2018). Many rural dwellers take pride in it (Mohatt & Mohatt, 2020), and it is an ideal sought by many who migrate to the countryside from more urban places (van Rooij & Margaryan, 2019). Likewise, the pastoral ideal continues to be reproduced, not just as an invention of tourism marketers and real estate agents but as something genuinely felt and appreciated, even under circumstances where it takes a lot of selective filtering of sensory impressions to do so (Johansen, 2019).

Within research focused on everyday life, there have been claims that lack of clarity and multiplicity of meanings may be valuable attributes of well-being (e.g. Atkinson, 2013), although there have also been numerous

attempts to identify ‘points of shared understanding’ (Conradson, 2012, p. 16) and promote particular conceptualisations. Smith and Reid (2018, p. 807), for example, suggest that well-being research is dominated by ‘economic and psychological approaches’, although they stress connections with health and promote an ‘intra-active’ perspective on well-being. This approach resonates strongly with notions of situated and relational perspectives promoted by Atkinson’s (2013) and Andrews et al.’s (2014) arguments about a non-representational approach (see also the framing essay in Part II). In developing their argument, Andrews et al. (2014, p. 211) also outline the significance of a ‘largely social constructivist, “representational”’ body of research and work focused on the concept of subjective well-being. Drawing these commentaries together, six, often overlapping, zones of shared understanding of well-being can be identified (see Figure 4.2).

This part of the book, however, takes nothing for granted and sidesteps the urban gaze by entering everyday rural life itself to ask a basic question: *what is quality of life in the countryside?* Quantitative quality of life indicators do not tell the whole story and are only as reliable as the assumptions that went into making them in the first place. We put such assumptions aside here in order to begin the book by questioning the very foundations of the field. The aim is to reappraise and take seriously the lived experience of rural dwellers in order that we may raise awareness, also among planners and policymakers, about the fact that their good-intentioned efforts to improve rural quality of life do not necessarily always align with reality on the ground. Moreover, we want to highlight and come to terms with the unsettling possibility that in some rural places, high levels of subjective well-being may be predicated on demographic segregation and the exclusion or absence of specific ‘others’. Where this is the case, should it be a cause for celebration or concern? How do we deal with the very real danger that such findings may be used to promote and justify racial and cultural segregation and the homogenisation of communities?

These are tough and important questions that can only be answered rigorously by immersing our research endeavours in the messy realities of rural life. This is what we have tasked our contributors and ourselves with doing. The result is a collection of chapters which generate important insights into the kinds of everyday performances, practices, mechanisms of power and rhythms through which real and imagined notions of an independent rural lifestyle are maintained, reproduced and reinvented. In-depth knowledge on these matters allows our authors to get closer to properly grounded notions about what rural quality of life is and what it can be. It also allows us to critically assess the intricate dynamics involved in the production of winners and losers in terms of human well-being, including how they are gendered

and racialised but also how they relate to questions of class and other axes of sociocultural difference.

### Introducing the chapters

How to deal with the danger that specific findings on quality of life may be used to promote and justify racial and cultural segregation and the homogenisation of communities is a core question and point in the moral geographies' perspective, which Michael Carolan takes up in [Chapter 2](#). He begins by questioning whether high levels of quality of life are the product of a community being able to keep 'Others' out, and if so, is that something we ought to be celebrating? To throw some light onto that dilemma, a deeper understanding of how minorities as well as majorities experience quality of life is needed, along with knowledge about how different experiences may have an impact on the experienced quality of life of others.

As a straightforward way to shed light on the dilemma, Carolan compares two communities with different degrees of homogeneity in population – one with almost only a white population and one with a majority of a young black population. As Carolan points out, rural communities and people are incredibly heterogeneous when it comes to quality of life, so the rural communities to be compared must have undergone some major challenges and the reactions to these challenges in terms of their beliefs about the world and about their future. COVID-19 shook communities all over the world, including the two communities in Colorado which Carolan investigated to see how the people and social institutions responded to a threat like COVID-19. The in-depth comparative study drawing on pre- and post-COVID data enables Carolan to empirically illustrate to us 'how "rural" and "rural well-being" cannot be understood monolithically' and the 'unevenness in how subjective quality of life was expressed between these two communities relative to reported household-level economic wellbeing.'

While Carolan investigated two very diverse Coloradan communities in terms of population in the comparison of the moral geography and expressed quality of life, Pia Heike Johansen and Jens Kaae Fisker explore everyday quality of life in six rural communities in Denmark, searching for answers across community, gender, age and socio-economic status to how everyday rhythms of rural life relate to social acceleration. They take up the point that, historically, everyday rural life was characterised by the near absence of a division between work and leisure, but that today most rural dwellers in the global North are punctuated by some form of work–leisure division.

Theoretically, they get their inspiration from Hartmut Rosa's thoughts about social acceleration destroying both human and non-human life

and his suggestion for a *decoupling of economic growth and ideas about what a 'good life' is* by directing attention to resonance as quality of life. Rather than fall for the temptation to align higher quality of life in the rural everyday life with de-accelerated everyday life, they suggest adding to the concept of social acceleration the qualitative dimension of time associated with rhythms. More precisely, what Johansen and Fisker do in [Chapter 3](#) is to anchor their analysis of how the people in rural communities deal with social acceleration in a Lefebvrian rhythm perspective. Through an explorative photo-ethnographic case study, they seek to answer how rural everyday life rhythms are involved in producing relations of responsivity and self-efficacy and hence, in a Rosa perspective, achieving resonance.

Following up on the fact that people living in rural areas are strongly engaged in the social acceleration of society in general directs attention to rural gentrification. As pointed out by Martin Phillips, Darren Smith, Hannah Brooking and Mara Duer, gentrification, well-being and quality of everyday life have rarely been explicitly discussed together, but can be seen to be implicitly quite closely interconnected. In [Chapter 4](#) they fill in this gap by offering an extensive review of discussions of well-being and gentrification conducted in urban studies, before outlining their connections to rural communities and social change. Philips et al. point out how ideas of well-being and quality of life have underlain conceptualisations of rural gentrification, including rural in-migration, community interaction and rural exclusion and displacement.

Adopting a 'more-than-representational' perspective, the chapter critically investigates the role that such symbolic constructions of rural gentrified living play in instigating rural gentrification and the use, transformation and displacement of these representations within the performance of everyday living in gentrified areas. Drawing on research from contrasting rural districts in England, attention is given to the significance of proximity to nature and feelings of (non)belonging, (in)authenticity, guilt and displacement in relation to the impacts of gentrification within the formation of senses of well-being and quality of life.

Gentrification is partly also a theme in Simona Zollet and Meng Qu's [Chapter 5](#). With the point of departure in urban migrants' visions about a rural lifestyle, they explore the motivations driving the migrants to relocate and their perceptions in terms of quality of life changes in relation to the range of challenges and the opportunities arising from living and working on depopulating island communities. Of particular interest are the migrants who are residing in a stable manner on the islands and who are at least partially self-employed and running their own businesses. Examples include small tourism or food businesses, creativity-based professions and organic farming. Their in-depth study illustrates how the processes of bringing together the urban

and rural lifestyle, networks and relations contribute to the constructions of lifestyle migrants' quality of life, and it throws light onto how post-migration rural lives tend to be constructed as having a better quality of life compared to before migration. Zollet and Qu's analysis shows how respondents imagine, construct and (re)negotiate their desired lifestyles according to individual ideals of what constitutes a good quality of life, seen through the challenges and opportunities arising from living in small island communities.

The last chapter in this section returns to the impact of crises on the rural communities and the question of moral geographies. While having so far had attention directed at the quality of life among the rural population *following and creating the flow* of cultural and structural changes, Maria Christina Crouch and Jordan P. Lewis's [Chapter 6](#) sets out to explore how Native people have dealt and deal with the punctuated story of the manifold and often generational changes to these systems: family structures, expressions of culture, land-based identities and Alaska Native cosmology and ontology directly impinged upon by colonisation. Informed by the concept of cultural trauma and a sample of conversations with adults within rural Alaska, the chapter provides an Indigenous, holistic framework of understanding the meaning and embeddedness of quality of life in a rural context. Touching upon the themes of family, subsistence, access to resources, health and happiness, traditional knowledge and values, acts of self, providing, sobriety and healing, Crouch and Lewis offer a deep understanding of the vulnerability and changeability of quality of life and point out how challenging it may be to deal morally with findings about quality of rural everyday life and with how these findings may be used to promote and justify racial and cultural segregation and the homogenisation of communities.

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## 2

# Well-being for whom and at whose expense: COVID-19 through the lens of moral geographies in two rural Colorado communities

*Michael Carolan*

### Introduction

This chapter is animated by a number of empirical tensions dealing with rural well-being. These tensions have been especially well documented in the US, the focus of this chapter. Yet I know they exist, and therefore complicate rural policy, in other countries (e.g. Almås & Fuglestad, 2020; Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019). For example, the 2020 *World Happiness Report* tells of how rural citizens in Northern and Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand are on average more satisfied with their life compared to their urban counterparts (Burger et al., 2020). Relatedly, note the findings of the US-focused Life in Rural America survey (NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard University, 2018). The report explains that rural Americans are ‘largely optimistic about the future, as most say the number of good jobs in their local community will either stay the same or increase in the next five years’; a majority also reported being ‘better off financially compared to their parents at the same age, and a majority think their children will be better off financially compared to themselves’ (p. 1).

And yet, from a follow-up survey conducted a few months later – Life in Rural America [Part II](#) – nearly half of rural Americans report not being able to afford an unexpected \$1,000 expense, while four in ten said their families have experienced problems paying for medical bills, housing or food in the past few years (NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard University, 2019, p. 1). From 1999 to 2016, the rate of suicide among Americans ages 25 to 64 rose by 41 per cent. Suicide rates among individuals in rural counties are now roughly 25 per cent higher than those in major metropolitan areas (Carroll, 2019). Much of the authoritarian populism witnessed in the US and elsewhere – Trumpism (US), Brexit (UK), the rise of Bolsonaro (Brazil) – has been attributed to deeply felt rural anxieties (e.g., Carolan, 2020a, 2020b; Scoones et al., 2018).



Here we have a group said to be more satisfied (Burger et al., 2020) and who report being ‘largely optimistic about the future’ (NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard University, 2018, p. 1). Yet at the same time, rural populations are experiencing runaway suicide rates and embracing a political movement animated by feelings of discontent and grievance. This is an unusual way to show, well ... happiness. What is going on here?

I do not attempt to explain, or explain away, the above tensions in this chapter. Scholars studying quality of life in the countryside know that rural communities and people are incredibly heterogeneous (e.g., Woods, 2006). Such ‘tensions’ are therefore to some degree expected. Expressions of satisfaction within a population should in no way deny the presence of dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety and hardship. But this does not mean quality of life/satisfaction scholarship is free of conceptual and empirical blind spots. For instance, expressions of satisfaction and well-being are still overwhelmingly assessed normatively, as ‘good’. Yet other scholarship complicates this picture. Take, for instance, economics, with its rich tradition explaining how utility is a function of trade-offs, where increased well-being for some often comes at the cost of others (e.g. Hediger, 2000). Another example: critical race and immigration studies, which describe, for example, well-being as a function of the dominant social group by being able to exclude historically marginalised ‘others’ (e.g. Laurence & Bentley, 2015).

I use this chapter to reflect on important questions that quality of life researchers must address: for example, are higher levels of well-being always a good thing?; are there circumstances where high levels of well-being in a given community could be seen as a warning sign rather than a cause for celebration?; and what would it mean for quality of life scholarship, and rural policy practitioners more generally, if we entertained the idea that conflict and anxiety might actually have generative (i.e. positive) qualities?

To investigate these questions, I draw on a historically unique data set. The chapter is based on research involving two rural communities in Colorado (US). The project began in late 2019 and concluded in the summer of 2020, which means it draws from pre- and post-outbreak (COVID-19) data. One community is located on the rural eastern plains of the state, while the other is located in the Rocky Mountains within a frontier county – ‘frontier’ is a subset of the ‘rural’ classification to refer to US counties with population densities of six or fewer persons per square mile. Beyond these geospatial differences, the communities also differed in terms of their demographic composition, with one having undergone a considerable influx of immigrants in recent years. It has become a minority-majority community, especially among its youth – approximately 70 per cent of the students at its high school are non-white. The other community was almost exclusively white.

By drawing upon two case studies, I am able to, first, speak specifically to the point about how ‘rural’ and ‘rural well-being’ cannot be understood monolithically, even when talking about communities within the same US state. Additionally, the pre- and post-COVID outbreak data add another important layer to this study – each respondent completed an online survey and qualitative interview at both points in time. Environmental shocks have been examined in fields such as disaster (e.g., Fois & Forino, 2014) and community studies (e.g. Besser et al., 2008), noting that they can be good to think about from the perspective of observing how people and social institutions respond to threats. COVID greatly touched both communities (as it did communities around the world), though the time-series data show that the outcomes of the pandemic, in terms of changes in quality of life, differed greatly between the two places, which itself is revealing from the standpoint of helping us answer the above questions.

As this chapter is intended to be empirically driven, and space is limited, I will hold off engaging with relevant literature until it is time to present the data. This allows for an iterative engagement between the study’s empirical findings and the broader literature on the subject. The next section, then, provides a description of the study’s methods. After that, I begin to unpack the findings. To focus this discussion, the findings section interrogates an interesting unevenness in how subjective quality of life was expressed between these two communities relative to reported household-level economic well-being. In one community, the economic well-being (i.e. household income) of respondents decreased between T1 and T2 and yet their reported subjective well-being marginally increased during this period. Meanwhile, respondents in the other community saw no change in their household economic well-being between T1 and T2 and yet reported a noticeable decrease in subjective quality of life indicators.

## Methods

Fifty -six participants agreed to participate in this study from two Colorado localities: a non-metropolitan county located in the far eastern third of the state and a non-metropolitan county in the state’s mountainous interior. The former community sits in a rural county, so henceforth I will call it ‘Rural Community’ (N=27), while the latter is in a frontier county, which explains its ‘Frontier Community’ (N=29) designate. (The ‘frontier’ designate is a subset of the ‘rural’ classification used by the US government to refer to counties with population densities of six or fewer persons per square mile.) Individuals were first interviewed between June and November of 2019. During this stage, data collection took place over two phases: baseline

interviews, which lasted approximately 1 hour 45 minutes, followed by respondents completing an online Qualtrics survey.

A few reasons drew me to the communities described above. I had numerous connections within these locales, which was important as participants were recruited by reaching out through personal networks. I wanted to build into the study diversity, both within and across communities. These two communities were therefore also selected because of this demographic and spatial difference; a difference captured by, for instance, one being a minority-majority community, especially among its youth – approximately 70 per cent of the students at its high school were non-white – while the other was homogeneous, consisting almost entirely (99 per cent) of people from European descent. The mean household income for both communities was approximately US\$35,000. (For a point of comparison, the mean household income for the state’s capital, Denver, is almost US\$70,000.) Basic demographic data for both communities are reported in [Table 2.1](#).

In the wake of COVID-19, I began wondering how the pandemic was being experienced across rural communities. I was also struck by how the pandemic had become politicised and racialised. This has been evidenced by, for instance, politicians in the US using racist narratives to talk about the virus and its spread – like when the former-President Trump talked about the ‘China virus’ (Vazquez & Klein, 2020) and ‘kung flu’ (Coleman, 2020), when the governor of Florida blamed outbreaks on ‘overwhelmingly Hispanic’ workers (Woods, 2020), or when an Ohio politician (who was also an emergency-room doctor) asked at a hearing if the ‘colored population’ are more likely to get COVID-19 because they do not ‘wash their hands as well’ (Siemaszko, 2020). I thought it would be interesting to extend the above study and obtain post-outbreak quality of life data to complement what had already been collected. The second phase of data collection began in early June 2020. All fifty-six individuals agreed to be interviewed for a second time. As before, each completed an online survey. Each also agreed to participate in an hour-long interview that was either conducted over the phone or ‘virtually’, using mediums like Zoom, Skype and FaceTime. Any names used below are pseudonyms to protect respondents’ identities.

## Findings

This section begins with an overview of elements from the survey data. Once presented, these data are triangulated and further unpacked using qualitative interview data. That latter discussion focuses on emergent themes related to how respondents grappled with diverse moral lived experiences (e.g. what is in/out of place), positionalities that varied greatly across the two communities.

**Table 2.1** Characteristics of respondents across sample populations (taken at T1): N=56.

	Rural Community (N=27)	Frontier Community (N=29)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
White	8	29
Black/African American	0	0
Latinx/Hispanic	12	0
Two or more	7	0
<b>Household income</b>		
Less than \$20,000	3	4
\$20,000–\$39,999	18	16
\$40,000–\$59,999	5	6
\$60,000–\$79,999	1	2
\$80,000–\$99,999	0	1
\$100,000–\$119,999	0	0
\$120,000–\$139,999	0	0
\$140,000 or more	0	0
<b>Age</b>		
21–30	7	5
31–40	7	13
41–50	8	5
51–60	2	5
61–70	1	1
71–80	2	0
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	15	14
Female	12	15
Non-binary	0	0

### *Survey measures of well-being from T1 to T2*

Included within the survey instrument were questions from what is known widely as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS) (Diener et al., 1985). This well-known scale asks respondents to answer the following five questions

using a 1–7 scale (1, strongly disagree to 7, strongly agree): ‘In most ways my life is close to my ideal’; ‘The conditions of my life are excellent’; ‘I am satisfied with my life’; ‘So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life’; and ‘If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing’. The following two questions were added as yet other indicators of quality of life: ‘My community is currently the best version of itself (or at least just as good) relative to any earlier version’ and ‘On the whole, I consider my community to be a better/just as good place to live today compared to a generation ago.’ In addition to these subjective quality of life indicators, respondents were also asked at T2 whether their household income for 2020 will be greater than, the same, or less than their income in 2019. If a change was reported, individuals were asked to estimate by what per cent their income changed.

Roughly 73 per cent of individuals in Frontier Community reported a decrease in household income from T1 to T2, with an average decrease of roughly 32 per cent. Some of the jobs and livelihoods negatively impacted by COVID from this group included ranching, restaurant owners, those connected to tourism and hospitality, and day care. Meanwhile, respondents from Rural Community reported, on average, no change in household incomes, as evidenced by a mean change of a positive 2 per cent. Some of the jobs reported among this group include truck/delivery driver, meat processing plant employee, wheat farmer, grocery store employee, hardware and nursery employee and public/private utility employee. Given the weight placed in economic and community development circles on material (i.e. economic) well-being, it would have been fair to expect Frontier Community to have witnessed greater decreases in subjective well-being in T2 than Rural Community, where incomes held stable. This, however, was not the case.

Table 2.2 depicts the average Likert ‘score’, with standard deviations, to the above seven quality of life questions across all respondents in both communities at T1 and T2. There are a number of observations about those survey data worthy of highlighting. I will make those observations here, without much discussion. In the next subsection, those points will be fleshed out with the help of the qualitative data.

First, to speak to a point already made, we saw an overall decrease in subjective well-being indicators in Rural Community, even though this group of respondents saw their average household income increase 2 per cent between study periods: an 11.7 per cent decrease in the average score total, from 40.3 to 35.6. Meanwhile, well-being appears to have marginally increased in Frontier Community, even in the face of losses to household incomes and a global pandemic: a 2.3 per cent increase in the average score total, from 42.6 to 43.6.

**Table 2.2** Average 'score' on satisfaction questions from both samples at T1 and T2.

Question	Rural T1/T2	Frontier T1/T2
In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	6.1/5.5	6.0/6.2
The conditions of my life are excellent.	6.0/5.4	6.2/6.1
I am satisfied with my life.	6.7/5.1	6.1/6.1
So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.	6.5/5.8	6.0/6.3
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	5.1/4.7	6.1/6.3
My community is currently the best version of itself (or at least just as good) relative to any earlier version.	5.7/5.0	6.2/6.4
On the whole, I consider my community to be a better/ just as good place to live today compared to a generation ago.	4.2/4.1	6.0/6.2
Summed averages	40.3/35.6	42.6/43.6

The mean scores for the latter two questions about community also differ noticeably between the two groups. Respondents from Frontier Community expressed greater satisfaction towards their community today than those in Rural Community did, who appear to have held nostalgia for the past. Relatedly, note the differences in standard variations in score between the two groups. There is considerably more variability in answers within Rural Community compared to those in Frontier Community. Note, too, that this variability increased in each question from T1 to T2 for Rural Community respondents. Conversely, that variability held steady (or even decreased) for the Frontier Community group from T1 to T2.

These data, while interesting, really do not tell us much; after all, data do not speak for themselves. In the next subsection, I therefore turn to the qualitative interviews to triangulate survey and interview data and let respondents speak for their answers to the above survey questionnaire.

### Unpacking quality of life: From the collective conundrum to moral geographies

This subsection focuses on two emergent themes to arise from the qualitative interview data (points the earlier-discussed survey data also tease at),

which I will call ‘feeling community’ and ‘moral geographies’. The former discusses how respondents grappled with in-group and out-group identities (e.g. how ‘us’ and ‘them’ was negotiated); the latter, relatedly, centres on the construction of moral understandings of place and space, in terms of, for instance, how people, practices and institutions ought to look, sound, feel, etc.

*Feeling community: beyond the individualism–collectivism dichotomy*

Considerable research has looked into the so-called individualism–collectivism dichotomy to understand differentiated actions and attitudes between groups. To quote one study on the subject, ‘individualism (vs. collectivism) is characterized by the view of an independent self (vs. interdependent self)’, noting further, ‘individualists focus on personal autonomy and individual uniqueness and place personal goals over group goals [... whereas ...] collectivists care about group norms and collective harmony and subordinate personal goals to the group goals’ (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 3; see also, e.g., Kahan et al., 2010, 2011).

I have no interest in trying to refute what is an incredibly robust, empirically based literature. Yet, like others (e.g. Baumann et al., 2017), I do not believe talking in terms of individualism vs collectivism represents a complete picture of how individuals live these values at the level of everyday life. For one thing, it implies individualists are incapable of holding any significant in-group (collective) identity and that they hold very egoistic (non-altruistic) mindsets. Yet we can point to ample evidence contradicting this position, as evidenced by, for instance, studies documenting identified individualists who regularly subordinate personal goals in favour of group goals when the latter connect to kin and close-peer networks (Carolan, 2020b; Darnhofer et al., 2016).

I mention this literature because it is problematised against the wealth of empirical support for the thesis that individuals obtain considerable satisfaction from strong in-group/peer affiliations. Or to put an even finer point on the tension: quality of life has repeatedly been found to be a function of feelings of autonomy and productive relationships with, which arguably border on feelings of dependency upon, others (e.g. Ng et al., 2020; Van Leeuwen et al., 2019). Our understanding of the lived experience of quality of life is enriched by talking about this productive tension between autonomy (individualism) and interdependency (collectivism).

Respondents from both communities spoke frequently in ways that explicitly tied together these often-described oppositional bedfellows, autonomy and (inter)dependency, often in the context of also describing elements of

satisfaction/well-being. The following is a representative quote of this lived tension:

Freedom and liberty are important; being able to live the type of life that you want to live? ... There is also something to be said about feeling connected to your community. We help each other. There's nothing I wouldn't do for my neighbours and friends and they for me. ... Sometimes I really need that help. It's incredibly freeing knowing you have that type of support, you know?

(Rural Community #11)

Community, in fact, was overwhelmingly described in the context of autonomy-as-interdependence, as a relational outcome that essentially allowed respondents as 'individuals to be more than the collective sum of their parts' (Frontier Community #8). This point also helps explain the high levels of satisfaction reported by respondents from Frontier Community in the face of material constraints, with participants facing, among other things, household income loss and COVID-19 at T2. To provide one representative quote to illustrate this sentiment: 'The world's going to hell in a handbasket but at least we [the community] have each other to look after; a point that gives me great relief and solace' (Frontier Community #19).

Yet it is important to highlight that community, in this sense, was not available to all, as 'not everyone feels like they're part of the community even though they live in it' (Rural Community #2). This realisation helps us address the variability articulated in the above survey data and why those standard deviations differed as much as they did between the two communities. Community, as a source of utility and well-being for its members, has to be understood in the context of having to perform a tricky balancing act between generating a sense of inclusion and *we-ness* while avoiding as much as possible feelings of exclusion and othering. Community, then, by affording quality of life, also risks creating the very conditions for undermining it.

As mentioned, Rural Community had over the last decades undergone considerable demographic change, going from an almost entirely white (European descent) population a generation ago to a minority-majority community today. Feelings of belonging and connectedness to 'the' community thus varied considerably depending on who was interviewed. The non-whites in the community talked about not identifying as being part of the community even though they worked there and had strong kin and peer relationships in the area. Community, then, was not synonymous with social networks, which all respondents expressed having. Rather, it included feelings of being welcomed in its institutions and places (e.g. schools, government, Main Street) and having a voice in the decision-making process when it came to deciding the direction of this identity. As one resident



explained, whose parents emigrated from Mexico when she was ten (she was twenty-two at the time of the interview):

Don't get me wrong, we have a lot of friends [here]. That's not the same as feeling part of a community; not when you're downtown in a store and workers look at you as a potential shoplifter or assume you're here illegally [as an undocumented immigrant] and can't speak English. ... So, no – I don't feel like I'm part of the community, which is seriously sad on so many levels.

(Rural Community #21)

It is important to emphasise that 'having a lot of friends' is not the same, from a quality of life perspective, as noted by the above respondent, as feeling 'part of a community', which brings us back to the aforementioned interrelationship between autonomy and (inter)dependency. We can see this in the change in variability in survey responses between T1 and T2 for Rural Community respondents. Respondents experiencing Otherness within the community expressed feelings of want when it came to having the same 'protections' as felt by those believed to be part of the community. Those protections came not just from having friends but from being recognised as part of the broader social body – the notion of recognition is a significant theme in the social justice literature (e.g. Carolan, 2020c; Fraser, 1995) for this very reason. This is exemplified by Tony, a middle-aged, Mexican-born meat processing plant employee who was told by his employer that if he did not show up to work during the pandemic he would be fired. This threat also included not showing up for work if he were sick, which encouraged people showing up to work who might have been sick with COVID. To quote Tony:

The company looks at me and sees 'outsider' but I'm a 'local' just like they are. If I was considered a 'local' I'm sure I'd be treated better, given face masks [at work], provided health care [through work], and not told our jobs are at risk if we got sick. ... And we have to take this [treatment] because we're 'outsiders'.

(Rural Community #23)

*Moral geographies: in-place/out-of-place;  
blighted; contaminated ...*

Continuing the above discussion, this subsection interrogates the moral geographies underlying the above conceptions of 'community'. Doing this brings to the discursive surface how quality of life hinges at least in part on normative determinations about what is and ought to be, which includes assumptions about how spaces and places should look, smell, feel, sound, etc. There is nothing particularly unique in this pivot, as a rich literature exists that highlights the spatial politics linked to notions of rurality, particularly in terms of contestations about what is in-place and out-of-place in

the countryside (e.g. Cloke, 2004; Halfacree, 1996). Yet this literature has not, to the best of my knowledge, been used to inform what we think about quality of life in rural spaces.

I want to discuss this because of the emphasis placed on particular spatial aesthetics by those respondents who self-identified as part of (as opposed to feeling excluded from) the community. Those in Frontier Community expressed significant satisfaction in the fact that their community ‘is a source of stability in a world changing at breakneck speed’ (Frontier Community #27). This group expressed clear moral geographies, as evidenced by their repeated talk about, say, ‘locals’ and ‘outsiders’. For example, state politicians, and the governor in particular, were frequently vilified by respondents for their COVID-related mandates, like the state-wide mask mandate implemented early into the pandemic. This shared identity could be leveraged during times of external threat (i.e. COVID-19), resulting in increased social cohesion and thus enhanced well-being, points supported by the aforementioned survey data. Respondents from Rural Community, alternatively, did not have this social, cultural, aesthetic homogeneity. There were people and places denoted by this group as out-of-place, which negatively impacted the well-being of all, to various extents.

While the ‘cleansing’ of public space has been studied in urban areas undergoing gentrification (e.g. Smith, 1996), less attention to this thinking and discourse has been applied to rural areas (Walter, 2019). This literature highlights that talk about ‘preservation’ and ‘revitalisation’ and ‘blighted areas’ promotes versions of the past that justify present politics, which tend to be racial and exclusionary. Elements of this were already expressed in quotes provided in the prior subsection, where non-white respondents from Rural Community talked about being viewed as Other (i.e. potential shoplifter, undocumented immigrant [#21]) and as an ‘outsider’ (#23). Alternatively, white respondents from this community talked about how, for instance, ‘certain parts of town have changed for the worse in recent years and need revitalization’ (Rural Community #11). When asked who resided in those aesthetically problematic spaces, it was always non-white bodies.

I’m referring to all of our recent arrivals. People who came because of the meat packing plant; not because they have any connection to the community.

(Rural Community #25)

Mexicans – that’s where most of the Mexicans live.

(Rural Community #15)

These points are especially important from a quality of life perspective as talk about ‘rural development’ is often couched in well-being language – e.g., to quote the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD), where they talk repeatedly about development through a lens that focuses on affording activities that ‘boost rural economies and improve well-being for the rural dwellings’ (OECD, 2018). This is problematic given how terms like ‘development’ and ‘investment’ (to counter ‘blight’) are frequently employed as colour-blind terms that in actuality mask racialised politics that work to exclude and thus reduce the quality of life of some groups (Carolan, 2020b; Walter, 2019).

This came out especially clearly in interviews when the subject turned to development in Rural Community, particularly those spaces in need of ‘revitalisation’. On the one hand, people of colour within Rural Community, especially at T2, were viewed by white residents as important from the standpoint of keeping food systems afloat – the closing of meat-slaughtering facilities around the county had taken an enormous toll on retail meat availability while also making it impossible for farmers and ranchers to sell their livestock (e.g. Elejalde-Ruiz, 2020). And yet, on the other hand, many respondents felt those darker-skinned individuals ‘could just as easily live somewhere else, out of town or maybe [the meat packing plant] could provide housing close to the plant’ (Rural Community #3).

A lot has been written about rural communities as ‘sacrifice zones’ – spaces of enormous vulnerability to feed capitalism and its associated uneven development (Lerner & Brown, 2012). Yet what the above represents might be better conceptualised as necro-subjection, where people are explicitly being sacrificed in the name of progress and growth (Rosas, 2019). The following quote, from a 40-something white female at T2 who owned a downtown business, nicely summarises this tension between the needs of global capital and those more pertinent to ‘locals’ and how ‘community development’ might resolve it.

Those immigrants [working at the meat processing plant] are essential workers in the fundamental sense of the word. We need them working if we want to eat in this country. But in the same breath, the trailer park where many of them live is an underutilised space. I’d like to see it improved and made into townhouses or condos for the younger, educated [read: white] families moving into the community.

(Rural Community #7)

It is important to also place these sentiments within the larger political context of the time. President Trump signed an executive order in April 2020 that declared meatpacking plants critical infrastructure. At the signing, he told reporters that it would address ‘liability problems’, mentioning specifically Tyson Foods (Bloch, 2020). The liability problems he was referring to related to worker safety. Meatpacking plants have been the source of numerous coronavirus clusters. As of September 2020, more than 200 meat

plant workers in the US had died of COVID-19 (Kindy, 2020). The executive order signalled a greater interest in the continued production of meat than the safety of workers – necro-subjection.

### **Discussion and conclusion: unsettling quality of life**

The above data and discussion offer an unsettling view of quality of life, with ‘unsettling’ serving as both verb and adjective. As the former, I mean to say the data induces pause and reflection when contemplating how we conceptualise quality of life in the future. But also, I mean ‘unsettling’ as an adjective that qualifies ‘quality of life’, noting that quality of life, or more accurately the pursuit of it, can create disruption, anxiety and, yes, even pain. Quality of life discourse is neither self-evidently positive nor neutral. There is a quality of life politics that we need to recognise and negotiate when looking to measure and increase subjective well-being. And as with any politics, rather than trying to eliminate difference/disagreement we would do better to learn to work with it, which, if successful, turns something negative into something generative.

To talk about this in more concrete terms, I will end by referencing colour-blind ideology. Strong norms of colour-blindness permeate liberal political cultures and had revealed themselves in certain quotes above – for example, seeing cultural/aesthetic differences as ‘blight’. This is the idea that you are supposed to see the person and not the colour of their skin, especially, at least in the US, in a post-civil rights, post-Obama presidency era. Colour-blindness provides Americans with discursive devices that can be used to defend the status quo by denying that racism (or any -isms for that matter) persists while presenting outcomes in ways that are themselves neutral to structural inequities. Examples of this include justifying residential and school segregation patterns as matters of individual choice, explaining education, employment and incarceration inequities between whites and non-whites as matters relating to differences in familial structure (e.g. single mothers vs two-parent families) or culture, or opposing affirmative action on the grounds that it goes against the American principles of treating everyone the same (Carolan, 2020b; Wise, 2010).

We have that small-l liberal ethos to thank for this, a political philosophy that celebrates merit and demands we treat everyone the same. This ought to serve as a reminder for when we think about rural politics. As Woods (2006) explains, rural politics is less concerned with the management of land and better understood as about the idea and regulation of ‘rurality’. To lack the discursive, practical and intellectual tools to talk about difference (e.g. race, otherness) is to practice a rural politics that perpetuates the

arguably most problematic forms of exclusion, namely, the type that occurs where those responsible do not even know they are harming others' quality of life.

When interrogating quality of life, then, it is important to insert complexity and nuance into that understanding – to see the heterogeneity of quality of life rather than viewing it as objective and normatively self-evident and monolithic. Let us return to those questions posed at the chapter's beginning. Are higher levels of well-being always a good thing? No. Are there circumstances where high levels of well-being in a given community could be seen as a warning sign rather than a cause for celebration? Yes. And lastly, what would it mean for quality of life scholarship, and rural policy practitioners more generally, if we entertained the idea that conflict and anxiety might actually have generative (i.e. positive) qualities? That is a question for future research, though the above data certainly supports the idea that quality of life, over the long term, might be enhanced because of conflict rather than in spite of it.

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# 3

## The difference that rural rhythm makes

*Pia Heike Johansen and Jens Kaae Fisker*

### Introduction

Urbanisation and city life have become symbols of the intrinsic logic of economic growth and the celebration of a rapid imitative diffusion of ideas, innovations, fashion subcultures and finance which form the basis of contemporary capitalism. The countryside and rural life, in this narrative, are portrayed as little more than appendages, envisioned to be either en route to oblivion or destined to play only a minor supporting role in the larger, that is to say urban, scheme of things. Having heralded the coming of a new gilded age of the city, however, urban triumphalism is hard-pressed to explain why the numbers do not add up where quality of life is concerned. As ‘our greatest invention’, the city was supposed to make us happier (Glaeser, 2012), but as shown in [Chapter 1](#), the truth of this bold claim is questionable. It may be true that aspects of urban life are favourable for the happiness and quality of life of (some) city dwellers, but as a sweeping generalisation the claim is clearly misguided. Urban life is not favourable for everyone and even if this were true, it would not follow that rural life was therefore less favourable. Indeed, the empirical data suggests that across the global North we are not seeing a widening rural–urban gap in levels of life satisfaction. On the contrary, many rural dwellers insist they are doing fine. Now, Henri Lefebvre once suggested that the rural becomes an object of study only when it poses practical problems to an urban elite (Lefebvre, 1953, p. 123). This is precisely what has happened with the rural–urban happiness paradox. The rural attracts academic attention because it defies the expectations of an influential segment of the intellectual elite, the proponents of urban triumphalism. For us, this provides an occasion to explore what rural quality of life is actually about in the messy realities of everyday life.

Theoretically, we get our initial bearings from Hartmut Rosa, whose recent work has suggested a decoupling of economic growth and ideas about what a ‘good life’ is: ‘Many still take it for granted that growth and



the good life only come together. Only if we understand and dissolve this link can we try to spell out visions of the good life that no longer depend on this problematic assumption' (Rosa & Henning, 2017). Since alienation, in Rosa's account, is linked to social acceleration, it is tempting to suggest that resonance may be pursued through deceleration. In turn, it may be equally tempting to assume that this is what explains the rural–urban happiness paradox: rurality decelerates everyday life, allowing residents to retain a quality of life comparable to city dwellers. But reality is not that simple. Rural life is as bound up with social acceleration as urban life, and its pace is not necessarily any slower; indeed, ongoing structural changes affecting rural life point in a very different direction, with increased commuting and the export of 'project culture' from the city (see also Part II). In any case, countering acceleration-induced alienation simply by slowing down does not solve the problem (Heidegren, 2016). So, even if social acceleration is problematic, we cannot slide into the truism that fast is bad and slow is good. The problem with such a line of thinking – to which Rosa himself does not subscribe – is that it risks an exclusionary focus on quantified time while paying no attention to other aspects of temporality, including, not least, those associated with rhythm. A key concept in Rosa's sociology of the good life, therefore, is the notion of *resonance*, which stands in opposition to the alienation engendered by social acceleration: 'If acceleration is the problem, then resonance may well be the solution' (Rosa, 2019, foreword; see also Rosa, 2013). Alienation is a relation to the world which lacks responsivity and which fails to affect any sense of self-efficacy: if our relation to the world is alienated, we are not touched by it, nor do we get the feeling that it responds to our actions. For Rosa, resonance is precisely about achieving responsivity and self-efficacy in the relation between human beings and the world.

Our proposition in this chapter is that Rosa's theory on social acceleration and his associated sociology of the good life may benefit from being informed by a rhythmic perspective. We do so by anchoring ourselves in a differential ontology and drawing on Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis to gain empirical access to how rural residents deal with the phenomenon of social acceleration as that which today stands in the way of achieving 'the good life'. In short, our proposition is that particular rhythms may be responsible for producing resonance in rural everyday life, which could explain why relatively high levels in quality of life may be retained in the countryside despite all the structural disadvantages that rural communities are faced with. Such a juxtaposition of Rosa and Lefebvre has recently been suggested by Christiansen and Gebauer (2019, p. 9), who pointed out that 'technological rhythms are accelerating but our biological rhythms are not. Predictably, social acceleration follows in ways that clash with our experience.' But the

connection has yet to be followed through by employing Lefebvre's theorisation of rhythm as an analytical framework for empirical investigations of how people deal with social acceleration in everyday life. The question we will explore in this chapter is how everyday rhythms of rural life relate to social acceleration: How are these rhythms involved in producing relations of responsivity and self-efficacy and hence in achieving resonance? Inversely, how do rural rhythms limit or constrain resonance from emerging?

The rhythmic perspective on time and temporality that we take involves a differential ontology, where difference is seen to be produced through repetition: 'there is no identical absolute repetition, indefinitely. Whence the relation between repetition and difference. When it concerns the everyday ... there is always the something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive: difference' (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 16). This dynamic or processual aspect of the repetitive lies at the heart of our take on rhythm along with a related emphasis on *imitation*. The latter is drawn from Tardean sociology according to which societies are constituted through the diffusion of ideas and desires by way of imitation – as expressed for instance in the related rhythmic notion of the *refrain* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). When applied to the phenomenon of social acceleration, this approach places emphasis on the multiple tempi and densities of the imitations that diffuse ideas and desires. As such, it points beyond the notion of clock time as an abstract human invention which is used to control and organise human and social behaviour, but also as one of the features distinguishing human society from nature. Our rhythmic perspective thus also affords a more-than-human view where the society–nature dualism dissolves into cross-cutting imitative relations.

For the exploration of everyday rural quality of life we used empirical material including 267 photos, 84 informants' written descriptions, photo collages and 31 hours of transcript interviews with 31 respondents in six Danish rural communities. In each, local community fieldwork was initiated by placing an advert in a free weekly newspaper encouraging residents to send us photos and a brief explanatory text in response to a simple question: What is rural quality of life for you? Fieldwork then proceeded by conducting household interviews with those who sent us photos. Later, we exhibited the received photos in a rural location, asking exhibition visitors to create collages showing their own answer to the same question. The material went through an iterative coding process informed by the combination of the sociology of difference and the rhythmanalytical perspective. The coding process continued until a point of saturation was reached and clear themes on desires, performances and rhythms was identified. Our findings suggested three broad themes which all connect to the difference that rural rhythm makes to the quality of everyday: (1) *biorhythmia*, pertaining to

how informants attempt to reconnect with the biological rhythms of their own bodies and surroundings, for instance, by reinventing peasant lifestyles; (2) *polyrhythmia*, pertaining to how informants sought to manage, negotiate and reconcile between the diverse rhythms imposed by urbanisation and social acceleration, including (dis)entangling the rhythms of work, leisure and free time; and (3) *sociorhythmia*, pertaining to how rural communities involve a plethora of social rhythms associated with formalised sociality, third-place sociality and informal encounters.

### Biorhythmia

The body. Our body. So neglected in philosophy that it ends up speaking its mind and kicking up a fuss. Left to physiology and medicine ... The body consists of a bundle of rhythms, different but in tune.

(Lefebvre, 2004, p. 20)

Our unwrapping of the rhythmic bundle begins with how our rural informants desired to reconnect their bodily rhythms with those of non-human rhythms – cosmic and vital. Overwhelmingly, this desire was fulfilled through food provisioning (see quotes in [Table 3.1](#)). Four ways of reconnecting through food provisioning were identified: (1) growing your own vegetables; (2) foraging (wild berries, fruits, herbs, mushrooms, etc.), fishing and hunting; (3) preserving and pickling of grown and foraged food; and (4) preparing meals from homegrown and/or locally sourced ingredients for friends and family. Photos included depictions of homegrown vegetables, emphasising how they were freshly harvested, for instance by showing them with roots and remains of soil still attached or by displaying a basket of tomatoes in front of the greenhouse from which they were just picked. Other photos exemplified how artefacts associated with food provisioning can become markers of the repetitive nature of place-based practices, serving as reminders of the season and the processes with which everyday life is rhythmically intertwined. Examples of this included a lamb's carcass stretched out on wooden stakes, hanging to dry by the beach, and a photo of fish being smoked over an open fire. These were accompanied by a text emphasising the importance of slowness in the local quality of food. Another series of pictures showed micro-production of a variety of dried herbs mixed with sea-salt, likewise followed up with remarks about the satisfaction of using local, traditional – i.e. slow – methods for preservation.

In interviews, informants talked about how growing their own food calibrated their bodily rhythms with those of nature and the places in which they lived. It was about connecting with the body by directly experiencing the rhythm and emotions associated with life, reproduction and death.

**Table 3.1** Informant quotes on food, peasant lifestyles and biological rhythm.

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- I'm more interested in permaculture and cultivating the garden poison-free, and I also keep bees. But it's really about cultivating the garden in a way where we could ... yes because I have this dream about making us self-sufficient. (Jette, Møn)
- I was just on a trip to Copenhagen with the car full of everything for my family; where they then buy vegetables, I have and so forth. So yes, that means a lot to me. ... to make things myself and have my own; have my own organic vegetables and stuff, that's also essential. (Gurli, Bornholm)
- You can say that as a supplement to this thing about the annual cycle of the farmers, that we also have our own because we have a vegetable garden and apple trees and stuff, which also show the changing of nature and the seasons. (Inge Dorte, Norddjurs)
- Klaus: [...] in relation to the kids that they get this red thread; that they can relate to foodstuff. What does it take to produce food and we ... we also butcher our animals at home and they [the children] are part of that process, plucking geese and ... so they know what it takes to get food on the table. I mean, it takes many hours preparation before you have a goose, but it just gives a ballast and it's really just a, how to put it, a learning tool [...] Kia: Yes yes, but it just tastes a lot better [laughs]. (Klaus, Kia and kids, Bornholm)
- And my lambs become incredibly tame and sweet and nice, which makes them much easier to shoot in the autumn when I have to butcher them, right. It's a combination of them being cosy and we just get super – we think – super good food out of it, right. I wouldn't want to be without that, to be self-sustaining in that regard. (Kim, Møn)
- 

Provisioning homegrown lamb, for instance, requires one to provide the conditions for sheep reproduction, to enact an environment of care for nurturing a thriving lamb cohort, and ultimately to slaughter the living beings who become companions in everyday life over the summer months. Importantly, this reconnection was not articulated as something individual but as something involving friends and relatives. Parents, in particular, were eager to provide for their children an environment enabling them to grow up in an unalienated fashion, especially where food was concerned. This meant gaining first-hand experience and understanding of where food comes from, how it is produced, and ultimately how this entails an entanglement of biological rhythms between human beings and non-human others. Parents were less reflective about how the choice of bringing their children closer to food provisioning extended their own options of reconnecting to their bodily rhythm through their children. However, a few informants, including grandparents, mentioned that it was a great satisfaction for them to follow how the children learned through the bodily experiences of unalienated food

provisioning. These conversations were prompted by photos of children proudly showing off the catch from a fishing trip or playing with lambs in a field. The reconnection with biological rhythm was thus seen to ripple across social relations, not just between generations as illustrated above but also between the rural and the urban. Informants expressed pride and satisfaction in being able to share homegrown rural food with city dwellers – either by bringing produce along during visits to the city or by inviting relatives for a homegrown meal in the countryside. This exchange of food between countryside and city cannot be properly understood within an economic logic – as informants did not do this to save money – but has to be seen as a matter of practising everyday life in a satisfying way.

The slow handicraft and satisfaction associated with growing their own food stands in stark contrast to the landscapes of industrialised agriculture in which informants lived. In Denmark, 62 per cent of land is agricultural and around 90 per cent of this land is farmed in highly industrialised ways (Danish AgriFish Agency, 2016). The result is a landscape marked by monotony with only a few biotopes and where domestic animals are rarely seen in the fields. Accordingly, the biodiversity crisis in Denmark is closely linked to land use issues (Ejrnæs et al., 2019). Given the dominance of this landscape type, it is remarkable that it was visible in only 3 of the 265 photos. Other photos depicting rural landscapes showed extensive – more traditional – farming with grazing sheep, horses or cattle in the fields and hints of nature such as wildflowers, deer, birds and berries.

In written comments and in interviews (see quotes in [Tables 3.1](#) and [3.2](#)), informants attached great significance to growing their own food in ways that were respectful of nature by being organic or otherwise environmentally friendly. Although rarely uttered in notes of nostalgia for a lost past, this desire for ecologically sound self-sufficiency reflects an attempt to reinvent the peasant lifestyles from which the cultural heritage of their rural places get much of their distinct flavour. Instead of drawing up a romantic imagery of an idyllised peasant past, informants explicitly contrasted their own pursuits with those of contemporary farming. They held distinctly negative views of the industrial farming estates that most informants found themselves surrounded by, either directly across the property boundary or a bit further afield. The presence of unsustainable, non-organic farming was seen as impeding quality of life and making many rural places nearly uninhabitable. What informants had in common was that they perceived their immediate surroundings as pockets of rural land where those unfavourable spaces could be kept at a distance and where hopes for a different rurality could be nurtured in both thought and action. At the same time, however, the seasonally dictated activities of industrial farming were still highlighted as markers of seasonal rhythm through the changing sights, sounds and smells with which

**Table 3.2** Informant quotes on the biological arrhythmia of industrial farming.

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Where we lived before ... there was a potato farmer who lived to be 85 and dug potatoes by hand, and we became good friends, and it was really like, how to put it, extensive I mean; he used his 30-year-old machinery and his David Brown tractor and sold potatoes by the stable entrance, made flour and such; it was really traditional farming. Then he died and it was sold to one of, what to call them, one of the big farmers up there. From that year, there were cornfields and they grow three metres tall, so from that year we were just looking into a wall of corn. (Jesper, Møn)

It's so few farmers who own all the land around here, and they live so far away themselves and some of them you don't even know and those who sit on the machines are often from the machine pools or foreigners, Ukrainians and whatever; so, I mean, we don't feel in that way that they live here either, the people who work in agriculture, so it's kind of a closed world I would say. (Inge, Nordvestjylland)

It's totally undebatable because it's not in any way a quality for [the conventional farmers], in any possible way; nature, I mean. It's simply a business, it's economy. That's the only thing it's about: how much can we get out of it. If there's the least amount of water in the fields they have to be drained; it needs to go away. And we just feel completely differently. (Tine, Norddjurs)

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they are associated. Using chemical fertilisers and pesticides for growing food represents attempts to defy the rhythms of nature, but the persistence of the annual cycle was seen to reaffirm the absolute limitations imposed by nature. As Lefebvre (2004, p. 73) would have it, 'everyday life remains shot through and traversed by great cosmic and vital rhythm: day and night, the months and the seasons, and still more precisely biological rhythms.'

### Polyrhythmia

Polyrhythmia always results from a contradiction, but also from resistance to this contradiction – resistance to a relation of force and an eventual conflict. ... This can be phrased in yet another way: there is a tendency towards the globalising domination of centres (capital cities, dominant cultures and countries, empires), which attacks the multidimensionality of the peripheries – which in turn perpetually threatens unity.

(Lefebvre, 2004, p. 99)

Social acceleration does not mean that this or that particular rhythm has become faster. Rather, it refers to the multiplication of rapidly changing interfaces or junctions between rhythms, or what Rosa has called an

inherent tendency towards *escalation*. Inevitably this produces situations where some rhythms in a polyrhythmia dominate others, even if the relation of dominance is not always immediately perceivable. An important source of inter-rhythmic domination has thus been the diffusion of clock time as the yardstick against which all manner of temporal phenomena are measured. Lefebvre was acutely aware of this and argued that the introduction of clock time entailed a modelling of everyday life on abstract quantitative time.

The most notable manifestation of rhythmic domination that emerged in the photo ethnography was connected to the relations between time at work and time away from work. Regarding the latter, it is useful to distinguish between the quantitative term *free time* and the qualitative term *leisure* (De Grazia, 1962). Free time represents a dominated rhythm because it refers to time away from work as an integrated element in the work cycle: a time to recover from obligations which is always followed by a return to those obligations. The rhythms of work thus dominate the rhythms of free time, which also makes it highly susceptible to the impacts of social acceleration. In Pieper's understanding and in line with the ancient Greek conception, leisure denotes a state of contemplation where 'the human being does not disappear into the parcelled-out world of his limited work-a-day function, but instead remains capable of taking in the world as a whole, and thereby to realize himself as a being who is oriented toward the whole of existence' (Pieper, 1998, p. 54). The distinction between free time and leisure – where 'free time is a truncated version of leisure that is greatly constrained by the necessity to work under the terms and conditions set by capitalism' (Shippen, 2014, p. 22) – can thus be projected onto Rosa's concepts of social acceleration and resonance, with free time being associated with the former and leisure with the latter. Now, if the rhythm of work is seen to dominate the rhythm of non-work, then time away from work corresponds to free time. Only to the extent that the rhythms of non-work escape this domination by work do they become leisure, and only then would they be capable of contributing to resonance.

Nearly all photos submitted by informants depict scenes and activities belonging to time away from work. This is not surprising given that most informants work in the city and that they were asked about quality of life specifically in the countryside. But how the depicted situations map onto the leisure–free time distinction is much more ambiguous. For instance, all the activities related to growing one's own food could be categorised as unpaid work carried out during time away from paid work. As already mentioned, however, these were activities carried out primarily for their own sake and only secondarily, if at all, for their economic utility. For the current purpose, then, the activities of growing your own food are neither more or less 'leisurely' than horse riding on the beach. Finally, some informants were

retired and would thus seem to escape the dominating–dominated relation between rhythms completely, were it not for the fact that the rhythms of everyday life are not individual but social – that is, the rhythms in which a retired person is involved extend through their social relations to working-age children and grandchildren.

To make further sense of these ambiguities we need to look at how informants reflected on work, free time and leisure in written comments and interviews. The first quote in [Table 3.3](#) appears to provide a very clear-cut example of an everyday life in which work dominates the rhythms of non-work. The informant also projects the duality of work and non-work onto a binary conception of the urban and the rural by connecting everything work-related to the former and everything else to the latter – that is, work-time in urban space and non-work-time in rural space. The second quote conveys a similar story from another informant. And yet it is not altogether clear whether these people made their strict compartmentalisation of work/non-work and urban/rural in the service of work or in the service of leisure. The third quote departs markedly from the others by accounting for a morning routine in which the boundaries between work and non-work are almost completely absent.

Clearly, our informants had diverging ways of dealing with the polyrhythmia of a socially accelerated society. Nevertheless, they shared a grounding in the affordances that come with living in the countryside.

**Table 3.3** Informant quotes on work and non-work (dis)entanglements.

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I think perhaps also for me, it's this duality because I work in the city and that's this thing with PC and stilettos, you know. So I think it's great with this contrast that when I get home to the countryside, then it's on with the clogs and out in the vegetable garden. (Inge Dorte, Norddjurs)

I think it's fantastic when I've been to Køge – about a year ago I was there way too much, I worked five days a week and had no holidays at all, for a full year. It was too much. I think it's fantastically wonderful to come home and to be able to go out and take a leak in the garden without thinking about whether anyone – I mean, if it's wrong what you're doing or if anyone can see it. (Kim, Møn)

Early in the season – when it's not so busy in the shop yet – then when John gets up and drives to the harbour, because he also cleans and he likes to do that, so he sometimes drives down there when it's four, half past four [AM], or something like that. So then I get up at the same time and then perhaps I take my camera and take a round out that way or out towards the reef or something, and on the way back I drive by John to say good morning down there and join him on the way home when he's done. It fits so that I can just get home and bake the bread before I have to open at eight o'clock. (Anne-Mette, Lyø)

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As the quotes in [Table 3.3](#) illustrate, the coping strategies ranged from a *re-entanglement* of work, leisure and free time to a *disentanglement* that reinforces not only the connectedness of the work–leisure–free time triad, but also the spatial polarisation between the rural and the urban. The third quote was narrated by a couple living on a small island. She runs the local grocery store while he works as a caretaker at the harbour. Her elaboration on a rhythm of the morning shows how even if they do not till the soil, their productive lives, like those of the peasants who used to inhabit rural places, are completely entangled with ‘their life in its entirety’ as Lefebvre puts it:

What distinguishes peasant life so profoundly from the life of industrial workers, even today, is [the] inherence of productive activity in their life in its entirety. The workplace is all around the house; work is not separate from the everyday life of the family.

(Lefebvre, 2014, p. 52)

In contrast with this re-entanglement of work and leisure, other informants used their rural residency to achieve a disentanglement, where work belongs to the city and leisure to the countryside. Even this disentanglement, however, was achieved by a peasantisation of everyday life where time away from work is devoted to cultivation, not primarily for the utilitarian purpose of getting food but to connect bodily and spiritually with the land. This elevates the practice from the largely regenerative purpose of a free-time activity to something more akin to a genuine leisure pursuit.

In this sense, the notion of leisure as contemplation can also be traced in photos of night skies, full moons and rainbows that the informants held up as illustrations of the gift of unexpected interruptions to daily life routines. By interweaving human and cosmic rhythms, rural places hold the capacity to prompt precisely the kind of contemplative state that distinguishes leisure from free time. Informants explained that in such situations they would tend to let the moment carry them away, prompting not just a mental but also a temporal break from whatever they were doing. This leads us to the quotes in [Table 3.4](#), which illustrate what would appear to be a completely separate aspect of rural life: rhythmic uncontrollability. This is of particular import because Rosa’s focus on responsivity and self-efficacy carries with it the risk that resonance comes to be seen as a matter of control. But the experience of responsivity is as much about the possibility of sensing the limits of controlling one’s environment. Our respondents attached substantial emotional value to the kind of rural experiences which, for lack of a better expression, ‘put human beings in their place’ by reminding us that in the greater scheme of things our individual selves are not all that important.

**Table 3.4** Informant quotes on letting go – resonance through rhythmic uncontrollability.

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This thing about feeling small and feeling vulnerable sometimes – that’s wonderful. ... Because to have a sense that ‘Okay, it’s not me alone’; there are actually forces in the universe, in nature, and in biology which are strong and large and ... We can do all sorts of things to describe it and try it and guide each other in what to do, but in reality, we never really know, and we have to be grateful when things go well. (Rikke, Nordvestjylland)

It’s easy to get, I mean, it’s a lot easier to get friendly with people here. Because people have a bit more, I mean it’s more ... it’s hard to say, I’m thinking ‘superficial’, but I don’t mean it negatively. ... It’s a good thing, I think. Because it moves the focus a bit away from this ‘what are you feeling in your navel right now?’ And it’s not necessarily always good to touch that. (Sofie, Nordvestjylland)

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### Sociorhythmia

How does each party (individual-group-family, etc.) manage to insert its own rhythms amongst those of (different) others, including the rhythms imposed by authority? In this insertion of rhythms ‘of the self’ into rhythms ‘of the other’, what is the role of radical separation and compromises, of tolerance and violence?

(Lefebvre, 2004, p. 99)

Social acceleration has an impact on sociability, the way that social interactions are made possible and how social relations take form. Rapid cultural changes, in other words, have an impact on both personal and community rhythms. The fact that sociorhythms may be imposed by authority should not be overlooked. In rural Denmark, social acceleration has made itself felt through project-based rural development programmes, an example of how rhythms may be imposed by authority. Rural development policies and programmes in Denmark and elsewhere have taken a gradual turn towards competitive, project-based mobilisation of volunteers and local action (see also [Chapter 8](#) by Tietjen & Jørgensen). In these schemes, funds are allocated via competitions between places where local actors are asked to submit project proposals. These set-ups entail very specific demands on what groups to involve and how, thus seeking to regulate the sociorhythms of everyday life.

In terms of sociality, submitted photos from informants can be roughly divided into three types. First, there were photos depicting community-organised events and activities organised through sports associations or the local school. These had a note of routine and were related to a work-free

time rationality as accounted for in the previous section. Among the motifs were people playing petanque and a communal breakfast organised by the local school. Second, there were photos displaying the more unrestrained interaction taking place at local festivals and annual celebrations. Here, motifs included people having fun during a concert in the village hall and midsummer celebrations in a public space. These connect to the kind of social interaction occurring in what Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) called third places, characterised by an atmosphere which is joyful and immune from personal moods and worries; conversations in which everyone can participate on somewhat equal terms; subjects of conversation anchored in shared experiences; and harbouring a kind of speech which ‘is idiomatic and steeped in local heroes and local tragedies, in gossip and romance’ (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982, p. 272). Third, and connecting again to third places, there were photos conveying everyday informal encounters at the grocery store while shopping, on the beach while enjoying the sunset, or on a path while walking the dog. These informal interactions also serve as occasions to get updated on village news, to foster ideas about how to solve a local problem, or on how to organise upcoming events. However, while the second type follows local celebrational traditions, the third type emphasises the coincidental side of rural life, the informal, unavoidable encounters with people you know.

Informants explained the feelings awakened in these rhythms ‘of the self’ into rhythms ‘of the other’ as a sense of belonging to a community and ‘as being accepted and respected as the interesting person that you are, rather than by your profession, social status or income’ (informant from Egebjerg). And yet, we also found that the cherishing of unavoidable encounters is enabled by carving out private spaces where such encounters are eliminated. The first informant quoted in Table 3.5 wrote to us that ‘we like wide open spaces – a view, lots of space, no shared hedge with a neighbour’ and elaborated in the interview that ‘no, it’s not because – there hasn’t been

**Table 3.5** Informant quotes on social encounters in rural places.

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So, it *is* such a small place out here that almost no matter where I go, then among a bunch of people there will be someone I know from before. This is unavoidable. (Bente, Vig)

So, Malou and Leo who live over in ... who are our ... we see them a lot; we actually see a lot of people a lot, but it’s also as you can see: you live a bit unbounded. So when Morten is going to Martin’s then he passes by here and then Morten drops off pears or apples or whatever he’s got for us on the way. I mean, there’s this flow here, but without ... I mean, it doesn’t feel intimidating or too much. (Ebbe and Susse, Møn)

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anything with our neighbours, they are nice people all of them. No, what I meant was, I have known someone peripherally who lives in a Copenhagen suburb who has had big conflicts around neighbour hedges.'

In this sense, 'lots of space' becomes a qualitative rather than a quantitative matter. It is not the amount of space in itself that makes a difference, but the fact that the socio-spatial organisation of everyday rural life affords a 'hedge-free' environment where the potential for conflict between neighbours is substantially diminished, if not entirely eliminated.

### Discussion and conclusion: rural eurhythmia?

Eurhythmia? Rhythms unite with one another in the state of health, in normal (which is to say normed!) everydayness; when they are discordant, there is suffering, a pathological state (of which arrhythmia is generally, at the same time, symptom, cause and effect). The discordance of rhythms brings previously eurhythmic organisations towards fatal disorder.

(Lefebvre, 2004, p. 16)

Arguably, there is a close affinity between Lefebvre's notion of eurhythmia and Rosa's notion of resonance. But since Rosa defines social acceleration purely in terms of quantified time, there is a case for exploring how rhythmanalysis may provide access to the aspects of lived time which lie beyond the realm of clock time. Bringing Lefebvre together with the differential ontology in a study of rural quality of life offers the opportunity to empirically escape the quantitative dimension of Rosa's acceleration and cluster differences in time (rhythm), together with differences in desires and differences in performance. In other words, we felt that such an exploration might throw new light onto what, from a rural perspective, generates *resonances*. Until now, however, the potential for a productive relation between Rosa's sociology of the good life and Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis has not been explored in any depth. Our mission in doing so was not to refute Rosa but to complement his work by exploring the empirical opening that rhythmology represents. The analysis illustrated that our complementary view offers an opportunity to also go beyond analysis of work-life balance and focus instead on everyday life as an integrated whole where multiple rhythms intertwine and mutually condition one another.

While arguing that 'a large part of the population no longer *needs* economic growth in order to achieve more happiness', Rosa and Henning (2017) stress that 'we should be aware of the danger of endorsing a merely adaptive mode that secures happiness beyond growth by a shift towards "immaterial" values, coping strategies and compensatory imaginaries, which might mask anti-emancipatory discrimination ideologically'. One might be tempted to

draw parallels between a quiet rural life often described as a romantic rural idyll and such adaptive modes. There is, however, no conclusive evidence to suggest that the immaterial rural values found in the study were indicative merely of coping strategies. On the other hand, the study also showed that everyday rural life is deeply integrated in social acceleration; living in the countryside, then, is not an effective means of escape. Where resonance was identified, it was associated with particular rhythmic aspects of life in the countryside and not with rural life as a whole. But importantly, those rhythms cannot be linked to specific activities or predefined lifestyles.

Rather, the capability to manoeuvre among multiple social acceleration rhythms and multiple biorhythms proved crucial for the production of resonance, for instance through the provisioning of homegrown food and the sociality enacted in sharing it with urban friends and family. Admittedly, the desire for homegrown food could, on first appearances, be interpreted as a coping strategy or escape attempt in relation to social acceleration. Neither informants nor their urban acquaintances used the practice to replace the socially accelerated practices associated with supermarket and grocery store food provisioning. What drove the desire, in our interpretation, was rather the reconnection with biorhythms associated with the seasons, nature and landscape, which thereby became dominating in the rhythmic practice. In short, the imitation of non-human biorhythms constituted an atmosphere of a bodily aligned production which embedded a sense of resonance. This is important, because whereas social acceleration entails an escalatory tendency, the biorhythms of growing your own food are cyclical and include some extent of immunity to escalation. Also, this was a desire *for* something other than the accelerated society rather than simply a desire to escape it.

Whether resonance attained in this way could only occur in a rural setting is not at all clear. Certainly, urban life looms large in the tale of social acceleration, but this should not lead to the automatic conclusion that the solution – resonance – can only be found in the rural, geographically speaking. In fact, the diffusion of urban gardening and the increasing focus on providing parks and green spaces in urban areas are closely connected to questions of human well-being (see also [Chapter 23](#) by Veenhoven et al.). A key question is where a proper balance can be struck in the combination and mastering of biorhythm and the polyrhythmia of everyday life. In urban settings there is a risk that ‘greening the city’ becomes merely another ‘project’ in an already (too) busy everyday life – thus contributing further acceleration. In rural areas, on the other hand, there is a growing risk that abstracting from – or filtering out – the imposing presence of industrial farming becomes too difficult. Urban project culture also risks spilling over into rural life as exemplified in Denmark by project-oriented rural development policy.

A clearer example of a coping strategy was the well-developed capacity of informants to filter out, or temporarily ignore, elements of rurality seen as a threat to quality of life. The most apparent instance of this was industrial farming. But we also saw that in the same way that they were able to direct their view only at the landscape elements that provided them with a biorhythmic connection, they were also able to ignore pressures for recomposing rhythms of sociality. Such wilful ignorance could perhaps be seen as part of a strategy to exclude the unwelcome urban rhythms that have their starting point in the fetishisation of growth. This obviously requires additional work on the political underpinnings of their practices, but it is noteworthy that none of the informants talked about prosperity or growth directly. Instead, the economic dimension was articulated through photos of houses and gardens in the process of restoration and rebuilding, clearly conducted on a limited budget with a focus on DIY and sustainable materials. Finally, on the topic of sociorhythms, the most significant finding was the capacity of informants to master a disentanglement of the accelerating and competitive rhythms of fast project culture and the contrasting qualities of a rural sociality, where social competition is low and one is accepted based on personal qualities rather than social position or proven merits. In this sense, social acceleration may have invaded rural areas, but it has not (yet) become omnipresent in rural sociality.

We opened this chapter by proposing that Hartmut Rosa's sociology of the good life would benefit from being injected with a dose of Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis. Based on our findings, we believe that this is particularly relevant in rural settings, especially with a view to retaining a critical perspective which is not confined to discussing coping strategies. Rurality is not a place beyond social acceleration, but is fully integrated with the phenomenon. Its presence may be more subtle, it may be harder to see, but it is nevertheless there. What a rhythmic perspective has allowed us to do is to approach those aspects of everyday life where dealing with social acceleration is more than a coping strategy. Rhythms are collective phenomena with an individual aspect: we all have to find our way in a polyrhythmic world that we share with others and this implies finding and creating our own rhythms. And yet they are not 'ours' alone but partake in the production of that very polyrhythmia. What our informants do in their everyday life may allow them to deal with social acceleration, but this is not why they do what they do. They are not merely coping but living. It may be a simple point in the end, but it makes all the difference if Rosa is right in suggesting that *resonance* is the cure for social acceleration. We believe he is, but we also believe that when it comes to everyday rural life, rhythm is what makes the difference in the pursuit of resonance.

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## ‘Everybody loves living here’: beyond the idyll in life within the gentrified countryside

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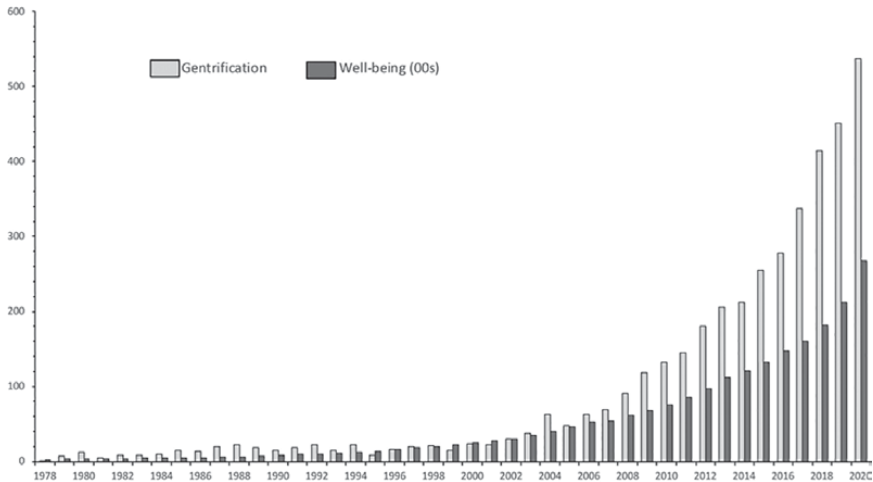
### Introduction

Gentrification and well-being have emerged as major research subjects (Figure 4.1), although have relatively rarely been discussed in relation to each other.<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest studies explicitly addressing their relationship is Vigdor’s (2002, p. 134) examination of whether gentrification causes ‘a reduction in well-being among disadvantaged households’ or, indeed, whether it might be a cause of improved well-being, an idea that also animated Freeman’s (2012) review of research on gentrification and well-being. This remains the most extended general discussion of their interrelation, although studies have emerged addressing gentrification and well-being in particular population segments (e.g. Formoso et al., 2010; Oscilowicz et al., 2020) and spaces, most notably urban green space (e.g. Haase et al., 2017; Kim & Wu, 2022). In this chapter we both explore general relations between gentrification and well-being and their interrelation within a particular spatial context, namely the countryside.

Within the small number of studies examining gentrification and well-being there has been limited theoretical discussion of the term’s meaning, despite well-being being ‘a much-debated term in both philosophical conceptualisation and research approach’ (Smith & Reid, 2018, p. 823). This chapter seeks to rectify this omission, considering how well-being has been conceptualised and which concepts have been employed in studies of rural and urban gentrification. Particular attention is paid to the emergence of a more-than-representational perspective, which is explored through research examining gentrification in nine villages in England.

1 A search of the Scopus database using title, abstract and keywords, for instance, resulted in the identification of only eighty-six entries containing references to gentrification and well-being, with only around a third of these including substantive discussions of relations between gentrification and well-being.



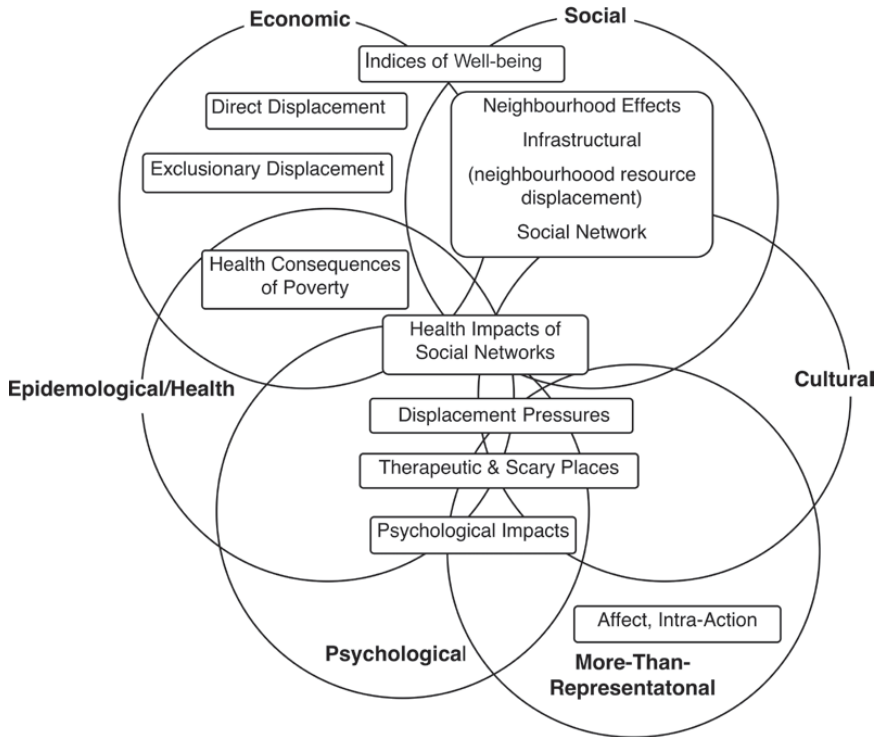


**Figure 4.1** Publications on gentrification and well-being, 1978–2020. (Source: Derived from publications identified in Scopus, by title, abstract or keyword.)

### Studies of well-being and gentrification

Limited conceptual discussion of well-being within gentrification studies may be unsurprising given the theoretical complexity and uncertainties surrounding the term as discussed in the framing essay, although a concern with conceptual definitions has been a prominent (Phillips, 2005), although not universally valued (e.g. Johnson-Schlee, 2019), characteristic of gentrification studies. However, we would suggest that the six different perspectives on well-being identified in the framing essay can be seen to be enacted, albeit often implicitly, in gentrification studies, as illustrated in Figure 4.2.

Most prominent in discussions of gentrification and well-being are studies drawing, often implicitly, on notions of economic and social well-being. Studies adopting the former perspective frequently employ quantitative indices, such as ‘standards of living’ and ‘quality of life’, and conceptualise well-being in relation to material conditions of life and as ‘a quality that inheres to the individual’ (Atkinson & Joyce, 2011, p. 134), with people viewed as inherently seeking to maximise their well-being (Clapham et al., 2018). Such features characterise the work of Vigdor (2002), which demonstrated a strong focus on material indices of well-being (e.g. housing costs and income levels) and the accumulation of material resources through employment and market purchases, as well as arguing that gentrification could contribute to increasing the material resources of non-gentrifier households. Vigdor claimed, for instance, that gentrification created job opportunities, improved services and/or lowered tax burdens on households.



**Figure 4.2** Approaches to well-being and gentrification research concepts.  
(Source: Author.)

These arguments heavily influenced Freeman's (2006) more extensive study, which further suggested that gentrification could improve the well-being of low-income homeowners through increasing the value of their properties, as well as attracting a greater range, and cheaper forms, of retailing.

Vigdor's and Freeman's claims have been widely debated, with research emerging to provide further demonstrations of gentrification's well-being benefits (e.g. Arkaraprasertkul, 2018), questioning the significance of purported gentrification benefits, such as employment and service growth (e.g. Shaw & Hagemans, 2015), plus highlighting further negative impacts, including direct economic displacement, when housing rents increase beyond existing residents' ability to pay, and indirect forms, such as the exclusion of people from moving into areas because of high property costs or areas becoming 'less and less liveable' (Marcuse, 1985, p. 206) because of increased living costs. As Freeman (2012, p. 280) has noted, a major question raised by such research is 'whose well-being is being affected?', with gentrification having the potential to impact 'myriad parties including residents of such

neighbourhoods prior to the onset of gentrification, persons who might move into the neighbourhood if gentrification had not occurred, property owners in gentrifying neighbourhoods, residents of nongentrifying neighbourhoods ..., developers, and policy-makers' (Freeman, 2012, p. 280).

Crucially, the well-being of various agents is interrelated, with Lees and Hubbard (2020) observing that gentrification often entails a paradox whereby a supposed 'social good' linked to improved well-being of one group of people is delivered at the expense of the well-being of others. This argument connects to more general claims that gentrification is never 'a victimless process', but rather is a situation 'in which being a winner is often at the expense of creating a loser' (Butler, 2007, p. 759), and potentially to Clark and Pissin's (2020, pp. 1–3) claim that the capturing of potential rents, which has been seen by some researchers (e.g. Slater, 2017; Smith, 1979, 1996) to underpin processes of gentrification, is achieved at the cost of 'potentials for well-being' among both 'human and non-human lives'.

There are considerable overlaps between conceptualisations of social and economic well-being, with White (2017, p. 125) arguing that the former was conceptually 'nurtured' within research employing economic indices of well-being, although became 'a cuckoo in the nest, to a degree displacing' this earlier strand of research. This can be seen in studies of gentrification and well-being, with, for example, Vigdor's (2002, p. 144) examination of gentrification impacts through economic indicators of well-being, briefly referencing education and training as 'potential remedies for any harm caused by gentrification', an argument given considerably more prominence in subsequent studies that drew more directly, and positively, on notions of social welfare and well-being.

Freeman (2012, p. 283), for instance, identifies a research focus on the 'institutional infrastructure' of neighbourhoods, and whether gentrification might create 'neighbourhood effects', such as improvements in schools and other public services/resources. Studies of the former include Formoso et al. (2010) and Butler and Robson (2003), who both highlight evidence of gentrifiers sending their children to state schools outside their residential neighbourhoods or to private schools, and Butler et al.'s (2013) examination of the impact of state school selection practices on schools and residential displacement. With respect to social welfare provisions, Freeman (2012) notes that deprived neighbourhoods often have targeted social service provisions, which may be cut as areas gentrify, decreasing well-being among populations in these areas and fostering out-migration to other areas, with Davidson (2008) coining the phrase 'neighbourhood resource displacement' to refer to situations where changes in service provision foster movement away from gentrifying areas.

Butler et al. (2013, p. 565) also argue that a sense of social solidarity, or similarity, is a key influence in middle-class school selection, with parents

making decisions about schooling not solely on the basis of perceived educational quality but also from a desire to 'have an appropriate circle of friends drawn from the same background not just for their children but also for themselves'. Such work provides a counterpoint to research employing what Freeman (2012, p. 281) identifies as a 'social network' perspective, which presents social interaction as a source of well-being and 'upward' social mobility via the provision of information and resources. Freeman's focus is, again, on whether gentrification can create benefits for disadvantaged groups within a neighbourhood, although concludes that there is little evidence supporting hypothesised benefits.

A third strand of research on well-being and gentrification are studies adopting an epidemiological or health focus. Fong et al. (2019), for example, remark that 'epidemiologists have recently begun to investigate the impact of gentrification as a public health concern', while Schnake-Mahl et al. (2020, p. 3) argue that a 'cascade of health consequences' may be associated with displacement. Investigations have focused on the health of both people displaced from a locality and among disadvantaged groups remaining in a gentrifying area, plus attention has been paid to how impacts vary among residents differentiated by age and race (Dragan et al., 2019; Gibbons & Barton, 2016; Smith et al., 2018), while Parish (2019) has noted a rise in private 'wellness' businesses in some gentrified areas. Many studies employ arguments akin to discussions of economic and social well-being, focusing on the health impacts of poverty and social networks (e.g. Gibbons et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2020).

Many studies of health and gentrification reference psychological stresses created through gentrification's impacts on housing costs and insecurity, household budgeting, social networks and feelings of place, belonging and overall well-being (Fong et al., 2019; Gibbons, 2019; Gibbons & Barton, 2016; Tran et al., 2020). Such arguments resonate with claims advanced within psychological conceptions of well-being, but also with many advanced in gentrification studies relating to displacement. A particularly important point of connection has been Marcuse's (1985) concept of 'displacement pressure', which has increasingly been interpreted as highlighting the experiential, emotional and psychological pressures that gentrification creates.

While discussions of displacement pressure refer to psychological impacts, they have generally not drawn upon psychological concepts and theories. Davidson (2009), for example, has explored displacement drawing on a 'phenomenological' sense of 'place', whereby displacement is viewed in terms of dislocations of people's feelings, meanings and emotional connections with places. Phenomenological perspectives were promoted as part of a 'humanistic approach' that influenced discussions of medical and health geographies (Kearns, 1993), although this research was also heavily influenced by a so-called 'new cultural geography', with concepts such as

spaces of security, scary spaces, therapeutic places and restorative environments emerging as part of a focus on detailing the significance of symbolic and experiential senses of place and landscape (e.g. Gesler, 1992; Milligan & Bingley, 2007). These concepts have been drawn most strongly into gentrification studies within discussions over displacement and green/ecological/environmental gentrification (e.g. Cahill, 2007; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015; Twigge-Molecey, 2014).

The latter area of study, which often highlighted how developments of urban green space were promoted on the basis of their well-being benefits but had contrary impacts related to the stimulation of gentrification, has recently seen calls for the adoption of a further perspective. Pérez-del-Pulgar et al. (2020) described this as 'relational', although their arguments are commensurable with what we are identifying as 'more-than-representational'. A common starting point of work employing such perspectives has been a sense that relations between place and well-being have been reified (Duff, 2011), and Pérez-del-Pulgar et al. (2020, p. 2) effectively enact this argument in their study of gentrification and green space, arguing that both academics and policymakers frequently employ a universalised notion of well-being, whereby it is presumed to be induced by engagement with particular 'material' conditions or necessary things to '*live well*' that are seen to be present in 'green spaces'. Entry into these spaces is seen to produce an improved state of well-being, or alternatively, a decrease, if this space has associations with detrimental conditions and effects, such as high levels of crime, pollution or stressful behaviour (Harris et al., 2020). Pérez-del-Pulgar et al., however, challenge such conceptualisations, arguing that well-being is an outcome of relations between people and a range of non- or more-than-human actants constitutive of a place or environment, which come together, through various ways of acting, to 'catalyse' diverse states or senses of well-being. Similar arguments appear in Smith and Reid (2018), Andrews et al. (2014) and Conradson (2005).

Conradson develops his arguments in a study of therapeutic encounters within a care centre located in rural England. As demonstrated elsewhere in this volume, rural locations have figured strongly in many discussions of therapeutic landscapes and discussions of relations between place and well-being, and in the next section we will consider studies exploring well-being and processes of rural gentrification.

### Rural gentrification and well-being

Given earlier arguments about the lack of research examining gentrification and well-being, and the study of rural gentrification being a

‘somewhat “neglected other” to the study of urban gentrification’ (Phillips & Smith, 2018, p. 3), it is unsurprising to find a call for more research on understanding how processes such as rural gentrification ‘impact local well-being’ (Golding, 2014a, p. 326). This call was made in a discussion of urban-to-rural migration as a potential cause of rural inequality, which, as discussed in [Chapter 1](#), has been an area of rural research where notions of well-being have been particularly evident, with studies often employing quantitative indicators of economic well-being to evaluate whether middle-class in-migration has negative or beneficial impacts on existing resident populations.

In relation to negative impacts of middle-class in-migration, housing market effects have frequently been emphasised, with studies such as Shucksmith (2000) identifying rising house prices as a cause of rural out-migration. As Phillips et al. (2021b) argue, such work bears the hallmarks of Marcuse’s (1985) concept of ‘exclusionary displacement’, whereby lower-income households are excluded from moving to areas as a consequence of high house prices. Research also demonstrated that, as in urban areas, the impacts of high housing costs often involved more than physical displacement or exclusion from an area, but also encompassed the production of homelessness, poverty and material and social deprivation and marginalisation among both those who physically relocate and those who stay in a location (e.g. Fitchen, 1992; Cloke et al., 1995, 2001). Studies also document middle-class rural in-migration impacting service provision in a manner akin to conceptualisations of ‘neighbourhood infrastructure’ and ‘neighbourhood resource displacement’. Smith and Higley (2012), for example, draw directly on Butler and Robson’s (2003) research on the role of school access in residential gentrification, arguing that similar processes are fuelling gentrification in some rural areas. They also note how use of private schooling in rural areas may contribute to school closures in small villages, while Hillyard and Baggeley (2014) examined how use of schools outside a village, along with changes in educational policies, disrupt social relations between schools and local communities, an argument that resonates with discussions of urban neighbourhood social networks.

Just as in urban contexts, rural research has also examined connections between gentrification and retail change. As with schools, gentrification impacts have been discussed in relation to both institutional closures and change. In relation to the former, Phillips and Dickie (2019) remark on how counter-urbanisation has been accompanied by increasing centralisation of retail and service provisions, meaning that many gentrified rural areas have experienced service closures. Often, these phenomena were causally unconnected, although studies have suggested that rural businesses have been impacted by incomers’ greater propensity to travel to shop (Stockdale

et al., 2000) and that retail and service closures often impact already disadvantaged groups most (Shergold & Parkhurst, 2012). Studies have also suggested that retail and service provision may change to cater for the consumption preferences of incoming gentrifiers, which in turn may lead to displacement of other consumption practices (Phillips, 2002). Phillips et al. (2021b, p. 79) link these changes to Marcuse's (1985) notion of 'displacement pressure' and Davidson's (2008) related concept of 'neighbourhood resource displacement', arguing that declining access to retail and welfare services, as well as employment, may make 'life in villages less materially liveable for people on low incomes or lacking good access to private transport' (Phillips et al., 2021b, p. 79). However, just as in urban gentrification studies, claims have been made about beneficial outcomes, including that higher-income in-migration helps support local shops and other businesses (Beyers & Lindahl, 1996; Bosworth, 2010; Stockdale, 2010).

Arguments advanced about gentrification's health impacts are not as evident within rural studies as they are within urban research. Key (2014) and Smith et al. (2019) have highlighted rural gentrification's role in the ageing of the UK countryside via practices such as retirement and pre-retirement migration, while other studies have explored a range of age-related health issues, such as the impacts of healthcare restructuring on provisions for the rural elderly (Joseph & Chalmers, 1995) and the impact of in-migration on social support networks (Joseph & Chalmers, 1998; Munoz et al., 2014). Reference has also been made to health concerns driving rural out-migration by the elderly and resistance to movement linked to strong place attachments (Joseph & Chalmers, 1995; Smith et al., 2019).

The relative lack of studies of health dimensions of rural gentrification may reflect the influence of cultural representations of rural space. A strong emphasis on idyllic representations of the countryside can, for instance, be discerned within all the foci of research on rural gentrification and well-being discussed so far. Golding's (2014b) discussion of rural migration, for example, included claims that these movements are heavily influenced by idyllic representations of rural living, which also figured strongly in Smith and Higley's (2012) discussion of schooling and rural gentrification. Research on health and ageing has also argued that a rural residence may constitute a realisation of an imagined idyll which is itself 'positive for health', although studies such as Watkins and Jacoby (2007, p. 857) have highlighted how lived experiences may differ significantly from prevailing representations, with people's recognition of this itself having 'serious implications for their health and wellbeing'.

The significance of representations across these areas of study not only accords with the focus given to symbolisations of place within studies of health and well-being discussed in the previous section, but also reflects



Figure 4.3 Study districts.

their strong influence within rural studies (Phillips, 1998). However, just as health and well-being studies have seen moves to more-than-representational approaches, so have rural studies, including some addressing rural gentrification (e.g. Phillips, 2014; Phillips et al., 2021a). In the following section we will further explore this perspective and its relevance to understanding relations between rural gentrification and well-being, drawing on an empirical investigation of gentrification in nine villages in the six contrasting rural districts in England (Figure 4.3).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The overall research project was entitled International Rural Gentrification (iRGENT) and details of it are available at [www.i-gent.com](http://www.i-gent.com). Within the project, three distinct nationally based projects were created, funded by distinct research funding bodies. The research that this chapter draws on was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/L016702/1).



### **A study of rural gentrification in England**

This research sought to explore rural gentrification through developing detailed, but theoretically and comparatively contextualised, village-focused studies. Within the nine villages selected for study, a personally administered ‘mixed-method’ questionnaire (McGuirk & O’Neill, 2016) was conducted, accompanied by use of semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observation, local documentary sources and secondary analysis of Census, planning and house price data. The questionnaire used open and closed questions, plus visual stimuli (photographs, reproductions of paintings) to elicit responses on issues such as people’s views of the character of the village; their residential migration and employment histories; changes in their properties; use of retail, welfare and recreational services; and engagement in local organisations and events.

Challenges surround the implementation of more-than-representational perspectives, including whether they necessitate a complete break with established research methods or whether it is possible, as Latham (2003, pp. 1999–2000) argues, to ‘imbue’ some of them with attentiveness to issues such as the ordinary, everyday ways people undertake their lives. The latter perspective is one we adopt: while very conscious of the limitations of questionnaires, we think that mixed-methods forms can be used in ways attentive to the ‘more-than-representational aspects of life’, particularly if attention is paid to the ‘stuttering’ moments in accounts, where people retract, backtrack or contradict themselves, ‘often quite self-consciously’ (Phillips, 2004, p. 19).

One problem of employing a questionnaire within a concern to detail the significance of people’s everyday actions, feelings, emotions and affective states is the many stories that might be told from the information generated. Questionnaire use is often centred around drawing out commonalities between accounts given by individual respondents, whether via quantitative analysis of the frequencies and co-occurrence of particular responses or through more qualitative forms of thematic analysis. Here we want to adopt a rather different approach, drawing on Haraway’s (2006) notions of ‘string figuring’, which involves the making, or ‘figuring’, of lines of connection while remaining in the thick of situations being examined. In the context of our study, string figuring involves bringing together accounts of everyday lives, events and feelings offered up in response to our questions, with these accounts, and the people who gave them, appearing as figures we string together in ways that hopefully enable us to act as a ‘modest witness’ (Haraway, 1997) on aspects of the mass of entangled actants, symbols, relations, practices and affects that we encountered in our research. The text that follows focuses on three ‘string figures’ in order to locate and trace

out some ‘tangles and patterns’ (Haraway, 2006, p. 3) that appear of value to ‘staying with the trouble’ that we, and others, identify as rural gentrification, and more particularly, on the relations between this phenomenon and states of well-being.

### **String figure 1: everyone loves living here**

Reference has already been made to the significance of idyllic rural representations in discussions of both rural gentrification and well-being in the countryside, and as discussed in Phillips et al. (2020), such representations figured prominently within many answers, including this one made in an interview in one of the Hertfordshire villages:

It’s just a beautiful village, it’s just got a feel-good factor about the whole thing ... we went to a party with the people we bought the house from, ... we got introduced to all these people and the feedback from them was the village is just as it is, ‘Everyone loves living here’ .... The guy that we bought the house from, he described it perfectly, he says ‘I don’t like where I live, I love where I live’.

This resident also commented that they liked the peace and quiet of the village and the access it afforded to the countryside, with the village having ‘fulfilled all the aspirations ... of why we moved here’. Their commentary brings in other figures, most clearly a previous owner of the house where this man now lives, but also other attendees at a party, and indeed ‘everyone’ living in the village. The phrase ‘everyone loves living here’ also had such strong resonances with the concept of the rural idyll employed in academic studies of gentrification and well-being that we decided to employ it within the title of this chapter.

Many connections can be drawn between this quoted extract and the comments given by many other people who figured in the questionnaire, with there being, for instance, many expressions of love and attachment by people to their place of residence, although, as in Phillips (2014), a diverse range of materials, beings and affective states were drawn into these accounts. This is not to say that everyone viewed these villages in a positive light, and even those that did often also expressed reservations about life in these villages, albeit often presenting these as issues impacting others than themselves (see Phillips & Dickie, 2019), or making reference, as in the following quote, to changing relations with their place of residence: ‘Very quiet, it’s picturesque, friendly ... I think initially the friendliness struck us. I don’t think the quietness made that much impact on me until I had been here a little while and then I, sometimes, found it a bit oppressive, the quietness.’

Connections can be drawn from this quote to arguments advanced within the literature on what we are describing as a more-than-representational approach to well-being. Andrews et al. (2014, p. 219), for example, argue that well-being is far from stable and that attention needs to be paid to the ‘ebb and flow’ of well-being, both due to new, often less-than-conscious affects emerging, or because of disillusionment or detachment from perceived well-being.

### **String figure 2: the concept of the village has gone**

I used to think about its location and its quietness, and its friendliness and its conviviality, and the fact that you had a good relationship with your neighbours. But to be quite honest, at the moment ... I like my house, I like where I live, but the concept of the village, all those things, has sort of gone. You go down to the local pub and you don’t meet the locals, you meet people who come in from Cambridge ... And a lot of the people who have moved into the villages have got this idyll of ‘village life’, ‘Constable-type’ idyll, and they want ‘The Haywain’ down by the brook. And when they come here, they won’t participate. They take the kids into Cambridge, they won’t volunteer, they are always too busy, and yet they have priced everybody else out of the market.

The figure in this account outlines how they used to ‘think about’ the village in terms of its quietness and the relations they had with neighbours. In other parts of the interview, this woman states that in the past she felt she ‘knew everybody in the village’, despite having been born in London and only moving to the countryside when they ‘had two young kids’. She adds that at this time ‘there were a lot of people in the village ... who had young kids’, with these children all going to the local pre-school, primary school and secondary school ‘together’, with there being a resultant ‘community’ of parents and children that she did not expect, being ‘extremely surprised to find how friendly it was’. It hence appears that although this woman moved into the village not knowing ‘what to expect’, she quickly came, seemingly as a consequence of the social networks that she and her children came to be enrolled in, to think about and value the village as a place of ‘friendliness’ and ‘community’.

Such an account can be connected to conceptualisations of social well-being focused on the impacts of networks of neighbourhood sociability, including arguments about the positive and negative impacts of gentrification, and also to claims within more-than-representational studies concerning the significance of the performance of actions and agencies. References to friendliness, conviviality and community are, for example, expressed in connection with active involvement in a school-centred social network, although the respondent goes on to acknowledge that their early

thoughts about the village were not reflective of their current feelings, which, at the time of the interview, were more narrowly focused spatially on the house in which they lived, with the ‘concept of the village’ having lost its efficacy to them. An explanation is then given which focuses on perceived absences and presences of ‘locals’ and ‘people from Cambridge’, with the latter being characterised as residents who seemingly accepted an idyllic concept of ‘village life’ as enacted in paintings such as Constable’s *The Haywain*, although presented by this respondent as people who were disengaged from active participation in such a life.

Connections can be drawn between this account, and many others generated through our interviews, to arguments concerning the impacts of gentrification on economic and social well-being, such as those referring to the neighbourhood effects of incoming village residents’ school selection choices and exclusionary displacements. There are also more biographical readings of this account that could connect to the arguments advanced in more-than-representational approaches about temporal variability of senses of well-being and to the significance of activities in their formation. For example, another resident in the Cambridgeshire village gave an account that seemed to express similar feelings of a loss of an earlier state of well-being or contentment associated with involvement in a school-centred social network:

When we first moved here ... there was a primary school, and I guess everyone would sort of meet there, and there was just more of a sense of togetherness. As we’ve gotten older obviously ... people have drifted apart a bit. I suppose there probably is still that village closeness with some of the younger children here and the new families, but I think, as for my family, it kind of just feels like the community spirit has sort of gone a bit.

This respondent relates changes in well-being to their life course and associated shifts in activity patterns, rather than linking them to transformations in the social composition of the village and associated attitudes and practices, although there have been studies seeking to connect life-course transitions and gentrification (e.g. Smith et al., 2019). The quotes of both these residents also connect to arguments advanced in more-than-representational approaches to well-being that highlighted temporal instabilities in well-being and the significance of activities in its formation.

### **String figure 3: atmospheres and that lovely damp smell**

[T]he village hall ... completely changed, because that’s been rebuilt. Some parts for the better but a lot of us say ‘Oh it’s not the same atmosphere’. You don’t get that lovely damp smell when you go in. It’s quite big and modern and slightly lacking in atmosphere.

Elaborations of previous string figures have started with a human figure, but in this section we want to focus on a less materially distinct figure presented in a quote, namely that of atmosphere. The notion of atmosphere has figured in more-than-representational studies of well-being (e.g. Andrews et al., 2014) and gentrification (e.g. Butcher & Dickens, 2016), in part because the term traverses a series of dualisms, such as between material and virtual, individual and collective, people and space, human and non-human, academic concept and everyday speech. Regarding the last distinction, references to atmosphere figured within many interviews, with many, although not all, of these appearing as part of positive descriptions of life in the countryside. It has been already argued that idyllic representations of rural life draw in a range of materials, properties and actants, and this was equally the case of description of atmospheres, which ranged across the views of smoke curling up from houses on a ‘crisp winter’s morning’, to the feelings associated with particular locations, such as the village green, or buildings such as a house, a pub, church, village hall or school. There are also references to a range of activities – such as walking, sitting, talking, drinking or playing games – which connect to arguments about the significance of practice in the formation of states of well-being. These accounts also drew on a range of embodied sensings, particularly sight, which has been seen as central to middle-class engagements with the countryside (Carolan, 2008; Phillips, 2014), but also sound, or lack of it, and, as in the case of the quote at the start of this section, smell. Several of the quotes also raise issues of temporality – with atmospheres forming, improving and being lost.

We want to briefly explore one further set of threads of interconnection, linked to the significance of location in these accounts. Anderson (2014, p. 139) argues that a feature of an atmosphere is that it “surrounds” and “envelops” something particular’, be this ‘people, things, sites’. A focus on atmospheres is seen to be bound into their emergence, and perpetuation and dissipation, but also is irreducible down to them, an argument with strong resonances with discussions over the significance of place in the formation of well-being. Anderson also argues that atmospheres are ‘not necessarily sensible phenomena’ (Anderson, 2014, p. 140), in the sense that not everyone within a location necessarily senses them, a claim that also resonates with arguments about the need to avoid reifying the impacts of place on well-being, as well as with evidently very divergent assessments of the atmosphere of many locations in the villages we were studying.

One set of locations subject to divergent interpretations were ‘village halls’, which are buildings established by various agencies, including local landowners, councils and community groups, to provide a public venue for meetings and activities. Divergent interpretations of these facilities were often expressed in interviews, although most strongly in relation to actual, or

proposed, attempts to rebuild them. The quote at the start of this string figure, for example, described how a village hall – that was variously described by other residents as ‘grotty’, ‘dusty and dirty’ and ‘like a Nissen hut with a couple of toilets bolted on’, but also characterised as an ‘amazing place’, ‘packed with people’ – had an ‘atmosphere’ that was lost after the hall was replaced by a new-build hall, with a kitchen, bar, stage and backstage changing facilities, as well as a large room capable of seating ninety people. In another village, a proposal to similarly replace an old village hall was met with protests and then a local referendum, after which the plans were abandoned and the original hall maintained, although almost a decade later the issue still figured strongly in many people’s accounts, with references being given that the proposal had left ‘the village ... quite bitterly divided’ and people still feeling ‘disappointed’ and ‘upset’. The strength of emotions surrounding these developments appears to exceed their significance to material well-being, and indeed arguably the affective power of the atmospheres that, at least for some respondents, seemed to be generated in connection with them. This may in part reflect the way these places, and their redevelopment, had become intertwined with affective responses and understandings of social differences and dislocations connected to processes of gentrification occurring in the villages. Degan and Lewis (2020, p. 518) argue that people ‘construct particular and partial readings of atmosphere, which are mediated through their embodied feelings and social histories ... to make particular claims to place’, an argument that potentially accounts for the continuing significance still given to both actualised and attempted redevelopments of village halls. The destruction or retention of a village hall, in this line of argument, could be interpreted as an erasure or assertion of a claim to have a place in the contemporary village, with recounting these changes also being an opportunity to reassert these claims.

## Conclusion

We have explored the concept of well-being as employed, sometimes explicitly but more generally implicitly, within studies of gentrification. Given the expansive literatures on both well-being and gentrification, if not on their interrelationship, our exploration has sped through a large literary terrain at great speed, and there were numerous areas where we would have liked to have paused to investigate issues more intensely and consider lines of connection to, and difference from, other points in our investigation. In outlining six approaches to well-being, we have mentioned overlaps between them, but there are also points of difference within them warranting examination, such as the differences between non- and more-than-representational approaches. Likewise, regarding our own research on

rural gentrification in nine villages in England, we have employed the notion of ‘string figures’, but have only been able to very briefly explore three of these, and even then, only pull out a few threads of interconnection between comments generated through a multi-method questionnaire and the preceding exploration of the literatures on gentrification and well-being. The nine villages studied were selected in part because they were different, but we have avoided pulling out these differences to stress complexities in the formation, and dissolution, of well-being in relation to just three string figures we discerned in our research, related to idyllic constructions of rurality, temporal changes in well-being and the atmospheres of particular locations. There are many more connections and patterns that could have been drawn from the material presented, and many more string figures that could be drawn out and connected even to just these three figurings, including ones that make much more direct reference to the significance of green space, which, as highlighted in this chapter, has been an important focus for discussions about well-being and gentrification in urban contexts.

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## Urban-to-rural lifestyle migrants in Japanese island communities: balancing quality of life expectations with reality

*Simona Zollet and Meng Qu*

### Introduction

Japanese peripheral rural communities have been undergoing a dramatic demographic and socio-economic decline, with many facing the concrete threat of disappearing over the next decades. This condition is the outcome of decades of out-migration, lack of local employment opportunities and cuts in essential public services, a situation similar to that of marginal or remote rural areas in other post-industrial countries (Li et al., 2019). To counter these issues, small towns and municipalities across Japan have been engaging in revitalisation projects, many of which focus on attracting new residents or encouraging former outmigrants to return. Hope is being placed on in-migrants from urban areas, considered vital for bringing much-needed population and human resources back to declining small towns and villages. In parallel, Japan has seen an increase in people moving from urban to rural areas seeking lifestyle change and more meaningful ways of living, driven by disillusionment with a stagnating economy and growing social and economic precarity (Klien, 2020). This phenomenon can be likened to the broader concept of ‘lifestyle migration’ discussed in the international literature (Benson, 2009).

This chapter presents a qualitative exploration of domestic urban-to-rural lifestyle migrants on the islands of Japan’s Seto Inland Sea, particularly concerning their construction of quality of life. The analysis shows how respondents imagine, construct and (re)negotiate their desired lifestyles according to individual ideals of what constitutes a good quality of life, seen through the challenges and opportunities arising from living in small island communities. The results highlight the different ways in which in-migrants are experimenting with alternative rural lifestyles and their struggles and successes in balancing economic and social needs with post-capitalist notions of quality of life and well-being. Moreover, respondents’ quality of life is influenced by material and non-material elements which shape their post-migration everyday experiences, relationships and practices.

### **Changing rurality, lifestyle migration and the search for a better quality of life**

Population decline and ageing in marginal and remote rural areas, driven by the diminishing economic importance of resource-based industries and by long-standing processes of rural out-migration, are nearly ubiquitous issues in post-industrial economies, from Japan to Europe to North America (Bock, 2016; Feldhoff, 2013; McManus et al., 2012; Stalker & Phyne, 2014). A vast body of research, mainly rooted in the European experience, has focused on re-imagining these rural territories and their communities as multifunctional spaces (Renting et al., 2009), characterised by a partial shift away from primary production and towards more consumption-based activities, such as recreation and tourism (Almstedt et al., 2014; Cloke, 2007). Research is also showing a growing interest in rural community revitalisation through creativity-based strategies, often connected to attracting a ‘creative class’ of urban-to-rural migrants to the countryside (Argent et al., 2011; Herslund, 2012).

These discourses can be further connected to the concept of lifestyle migration, an umbrella term that encompasses various phenomena related to the ‘spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life’ (Benson, 2009, p. 2). A popular concept in the lifestyle and amenity migration literature is that of the rural idyll (Bell, 2006), which encompasses many of the elements behind the search for a better life, given that rural areas are generally constructed as having a slower, more relaxed lifestyle, more space and natural amenities, lower cost of living and a stronger feeling of community (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009). Lifestyle migrants also tend to describe quality of life and self-fulfilment as connected to having a more meaningful way of life, frequently expressed by the desire of being ‘one’s own boss’, achieving work–life balance and pursuing personal passions and interests (Benson, 2009; Gosnell & Abrams, 2009). Consequently, many lifestyle migrants are self-employed – often following radical career changes – both by choice and because self-employment frequently represents the only available option to realise a desired lifestyle in rural areas (Akgün et al., 2011; Bell & Jayne, 2010; Herslund, 2012). At the same time, many rural settings have been – or are being – constructed as sites for “‘alternative” lifestyles for those disillusioned with urban living’ (Kneafsey et al., 2001, p. 308), a trend that is especially pronounced across global North countries (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012; Wilbur, 2013).

Some forms of lifestyle migration have negative repercussions on receiving communities, notably because they can trigger gentrification processes that cause rising property prices and social conflict (Kondo

et al., 2012; Solana-Solana, 2010). However, in-migrants to rural areas, in particular those who establish small and micro-businesses, can also be potential catalysts for social, economic and even environmental regeneration (Bosworth & Atterton, 2012; Carson & Carson, 2018; Pinto-Correia et al., 2017). Lifestyle migrants also play a relational role, as they develop networks that extend outside the local area and bring in contacts, skills and experiences that can create new linkages, as well as new flows of people, ideas and products between urban and rural areas (Mayer et al., 2016).

Less clear, however, is how these processes contribute to the construction of lifestyle migrants' quality of life in their rural destination. Even though post-migration rural lives tend to be perceived as having a better quality of life compared to before migration, lifestyle migrants' everyday life experiences, as well as how 'the reasoning and circumstances leading to migration ... inform experiences of life within the destination' (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009), remain under-researched. This is also true in the Japanese context, which presents the additional challenge of not fitting neatly within the Western-based conceptualisation of rural lifestyle migration.

### Lifestyle migration and quality of life in rural Japan

In Japan, the speed and scale of ageing and rural decline pose an unprecedented social and economic challenge, worsened by the stark rural–urban demographic imbalance of the Japanese population, one quarter of which is concentrated in the Greater Tokyo Area (Feldhoff, 2013). A recent report on rural depopulation shows that in over 22 per cent of Japan's 65,000 hamlets, more than half of the residents are over 65 years old (MIC, 2017). These communities are destined to hollow out and eventually become ghost towns in the next decades (Love, 2013; Matanle, 2016).

Efforts to slow this decline have intensified in recent years, including through policies aimed at attracting new residents. One example is the *chiiki okoshi kyouryokutai* (local revitalisation cooperation group) programme, established in 2009 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications to support urban residents willing to move to depopulating rural areas and engage in local revitalisation activities (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2009). Over the past two decades, there has also been an increase in the number of people choosing to relocate to rural areas, despite shortcomings in terms of employment opportunities or service availability (Klien, 2020; Shimojima & Ohe, 2016).

Unlike in Western contexts, where in-migration to rural areas is often viewed negatively, in Japan the ability to attract new residents is seen as essential for the survival of small rural communities (Feldhoff, 2013). Moreover, Japan does not have a pre-existing significant counter-urbanisation trend as

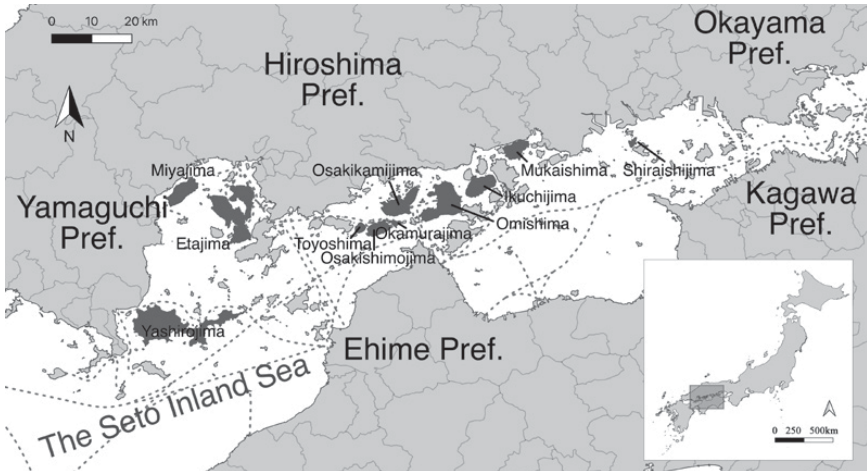
identified in other contexts (Dwight Hines, 2010; Halfacree, 2012), making it challenging to draw parallels between the dynamics of domestic urban-to-rural migration in Japan and those observed in the international literature. For example, gentrification and displacement of local people associated with lifestyle migration has mainly been identified and researched in an Anglo-American context (Bosworth, 2010; Halfacree, 2008) and in relation to North–South migration (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009), but a scan of the Japanese literature does not reveal significant impacts associated with these processes.

Similarities with the international lifestyle migration literature do emerge in the discussion of Japanese rural in-migrants’ motivations, centred around the pursuit of a better quality of life and more meaningful ways of living. Young Japanese people, in particular, are increasingly disillusioned with the life path that is traditionally expected of them, meaning full-time employment as white-collar employees, an aspect that is to a large extent driving lifestyle migration to rural places (Klien, 2020; Rosenberger, 2014; Sasaki, 2018). Many in-migrants start new businesses, either as a means to support themselves and their families economically or as a way to fulfil individual aspirations (Qu, Coulton, & Funck, 2020). Finally, a growing number of in-migrants are also motivated by the desire for downsized, more sustainable lifestyles, which often involve engaging in sustainable farming either as a lifestyle business or for self-consumption (Osawa, 2013; Rosenberger, 2017; Zollet & Maharjan, 2021).

Given that Japan is one of the countries where the compounded effects of rural demographic and economic decline have been manifesting the earliest, it represents important ground for investigating new modes of living in rural areas and small towns (Feldhoff, 2013; Matanle, 2016). Furthermore, since these issues are starting to affect an increasing number of countries across the world, research on why new residents move to rural communities, and how their quality of life is affected as a result, becomes crucial. At the same time, focusing on Japan offers a novel outlook on this phenomenon from a non-Western perspective. Research focused on lifestyle migrants’ quality of life in rural Japan, with exceptions such as Klein (2015, 2020) and Rosenberger (2017) is still scarce; given the issues of rural ageing, research on rural quality of life has mainly focused on the elderly population (Sewo Sampaio et al., 2013; Tsuji & Khan, 2016). Issues such as children’s education and job opportunities, which are highly relevant to in-migrants’ quality of life, as well as non-material aspects constituting quality of life, remain under-researched.

### Study area

The Seto Inland Sea of Japan contains almost 3,000 small islands, several hundred of which are inhabited. Despite not always being ‘remote’ in



**Figure 5.1** A map of the Seto Inland Sea, showing the islands included in the research.

terms of physical distance, many of them are not connected to the mainland by bridges, and access through ferry transportation is limited. The availability of essential services (schools, hospitals, grocery stores) is also limited and has been deteriorating further due to the steady population decline that characterises most island communities in the Seto Inland Sea (Qu, McCormick, & Funck, 2020; Zollet & Qu, 2019). As a consequence, attracting in-migrants and developing alternative employment sources, such as tourism, especially through small businesses, is seen as vital by policymakers (Qu, Coulton, & Funck, 2020). An important aspect to note is that, in the eyes of Japanese people, these islands – despite being called the ‘Mediterranean of Japan’ by virtue of their climate – generally do not have the idyllic or exotic image of other island destinations around the world, and therefore there has been relatively little expansion – either past or present – in terms of tourism development or gentrification (Qu, 2019).

This study was conducted on eleven islands belonging to four of the prefectures facing the Seto Inland Sea (Hiroshima, Okayama, Ehime and Yamaguchi) (Figure 5.1). The islands were selected according to the following criteria: (1) a mix of islands connected to the mainland either by bridge or by ferry; and (2) islands where it was possible to identify and contact potential respondents. For each of the islands, we conducted a minimum of one interview (for the smaller islands) and up to seven interviews (for the larger ones).

## Methods

The results presented in this chapter are part of a wider research project about domestic lifestyle in-migrants in Japan and their role in maintaining the vitality of small communities in rural areas. The main criteria for selecting the respondents were the following: people who had recently in-migrated (within ten years); who had relocated permanently or semi-permanently to the islands from urban areas; and who had moved to the islands due to lifestyle reasons, meaning that they were not driven by external forces such as family issues or job relocation.

Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with in-migrants and participant observation during repeated field visits and on-site events. This choice addressed the need to understand the motivations behind participants' choices and the factors contributing to their construction of quality of life within the specific context in which in-migrants live and work (Harvey et al., 2012). To identify potential respondents, we used a mix of purposive and snowball sampling. A total of thirty-six semi-structured interviews with in-migrants (including some couples who were interviewed together) were conducted between September 2018 and March 2019. The interviews were conducted in Japanese (N=31) and English (N=5). Subsequently, the Japanese interviews were transcribed by a native speaker and translated. The transcriptions were analysed to identify common themes and emergent themes and patterns connected to in-migrants' quality of life construction, related to both material and non-material aspects relevant to their experience of moving and living on the islands.

Among the interviewees, 46 per cent were male and 34 per cent female, while the remaining 20 per cent was composed of couples who had relocated to the islands together. Most were in their 30s and 40s. The majority had no previous ties with the island they chose (I-turn), while a few had family ties to their island (mainly through their grandparents) and had decided to return or to move to their family's place of origin after a prolonged period of living elsewhere (U-turn). Many had lived in one or more of Japan's major cities, such as Tokyo or Osaka. Respondents can be roughly classified into three (overlapping) categories according to their occupation: organic farming, creative professions (photographers, artists, craft makers) and hospitality-related businesses (guesthouses, cafes, restaurants). This distribution finds correspondence with the literature on urban to rural migration, where creativity-based occupations are common among lifestyle migrants (Kneafsey et al., 2001). Similarly, occupations connected to land-based 'alternative' lifestyles, often involving farming and food production, are also common (Wilbur, 2013).



As supporting data, we used the results of a questionnaire survey conducted among the residents of an ageing island community on one of the islands covered in this paper. The questionnaire focused on life on the island (although mainly in relation to elderly residents). In this chapter, however, we use only the results of one question pertaining specifically to quality of life, and mainly as background information to introduce the qualitative interviews.

## Results and discussion

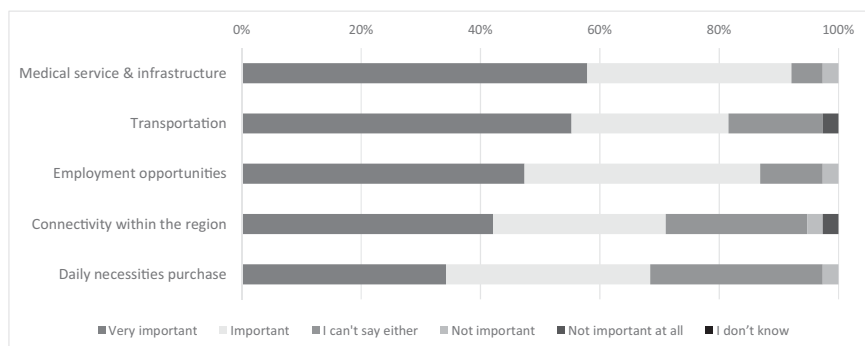
### *Respondents' motivations for moving to rural communities*

The most common motivation behind respondents' choice to move to rural island communities was the desire to reclaim the possibility to live in ways mostly denied to them in urban spaces, such as growing their own food, experiencing nature and community more directly and having the possibility to raise and care for children outside the hectic rhythm and pressure of employed city life. Extremely common across interviews was the search for a simpler, 'slower' and downsized lifestyle in a more natural living environment. Although the islands' nature and warm climate did play a role in attracting in-migrants, they appeared quite different from the wealthy 'hedonistic residential tourists' (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009, p. 612) described in the North–South migration literature, as most respondents had modest middle-class backgrounds and were not retirees. The desire to grow healthy food also ranked high among in-migrants' motivations (fourteen interviewees were doing organic farming either as a full-time or part-time occupation). This trend has intensified since the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011, which made many Japanese people uneasy about food sourced through conventional channels (Teoh, 2016). Masayuki,<sup>1</sup> one of the respondents, decided to move to an island in 2012, and describes his choice as follows:

My child started going to kindergarten in 2010, but in 2011 there was the Great East Japan Earthquake. At that time I started wondering if it was a good idea to keep working in Tokyo, and I decided that I wanted to have a lifestyle where I could grow my own food.

In parallel, most respondents also stated that one of the main reasons that motivated them to move was the possibility of being their own boss and exploring personal interests, values and ideas. Moving to rural areas was seen as opening new possibilities to embark on 'lifestyle experiments' with relatively few risks involved, including opening new businesses and engaging

1 All names are pseudonyms to protect respondents' privacy.



**Figure 5.2** Results of the question ‘rate the importance of the following items in terms of the quality of life for your island community’ (N=38).

in what interviewees felt was more meaningful work. In general, they were highly pluri-active and flexible in their work-related choices. Mixed businesses, characterised by frequent redesign and recombination of activities based on external or personal circumstances, were common, exemplifying a process of creative bricolage that is common among Japanese rural in-migrants. Bricolage has been defined as ‘making do’ using ‘whatever is at hand’ (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 11) and can in this case be applied to the creative use and (re)combination of available skills and resources for lifestyle-related purposes.

*Material aspects contributing to quality of life:  
infrastructure and access to services*

We start this section with the findings of the community survey, specifically those of a question asking respondents to rate the importance of a number of elements contributing to the quality of life of island community members. The survey received thirty-eight completed questionnaires. Among the respondents, 61 per cent were local long-term residents and 39 per cent were in-migrants. The results are shown in Figure 5.2. As the chart shows, respondents’ top concerns were the existence of medical services and related infrastructure (such as clinics and nursing homes), followed by transportation, both of which were indicated as ‘very important’ by over 50 per cent of respondents. Medical services and infrastructure, in particular, were the main concern, with 92 per cent of respondents considering them either ‘very important’ or ‘important’. This reflects an emphasis on the needs of the elderly population: people over 65 years old make up 67 per cent of residents in the community, and 31 per cent are more than 80 years old (Kure City,

2019). This reflects a situation that is common to many other island and rural communities.

The interviews with lifestyle migrants further specify the material elements that contribute (either positively or negatively) to their quality of life. While easy and quick access to medical services was often mentioned, it was mainly in relation to the needs of the community as a whole; this is likely related to the relatively young age of respondents, most of whom are in their 30s and 40s. On the other hand, the presence of education services, particularly elementary and middle schools, was a common cause for worry for respondents. In virtually all islands schools have decreased dramatically in the past two decades, with many having only a handful of children and being on the verge of closing or being incorporated with other, more distant ones. As one respondent with two young children commented, ‘when I moved to [town name], there were still elementary and junior high schools, but now that the schools have been integrated ... the junior high school is on the next island. This is a big problem for the child-rearing generation’ (female, TV reporter).

The presence (or absence) of high-speed Internet connection was another major factor enabling in-migrants to live on the islands, with some going as far as describing it as a ‘lifeline’. The fact that high-speed Internet coverage is uneven among islands was considered an obstacle for those respondents who depend on fast and reliable Internet access for working and running their businesses. Transportation issues were also frequently mentioned, especially concerning the high cost of ferry services or bridge tolls; however, since most respondents live and work on the islands year-round, this was not perceived as decreasing their overall quality of life, especially thanks to the possibility of making purchases online and to Japan’s cheap and efficient delivery services, as mentioned by this organic farmer: ‘[we go out of the island] once a month. Other than that, honestly ... if we want something, we get it on the Internet. ... we rely on deliveries a lot, so we don’t feel that our life is inconvenient.’

In addition, although many respondents admit to having had to change their lifestyle and habits – for example by drastically decreasing activities such as shopping or eating out – they did not feel that this had caused a decrease in their quality of life. On the contrary, most perceived it as something positive: rather than feeling constrained by the island’s physical boundaries, respondents considered them as liberating. They also enjoyed the simplicity of their new life, away from the trappings and inconvenience of urban life. A former Tokyo resident, for example, described wanting something radically different from her previous ‘big city’ life, ‘an inconvenient (*fuben*) lifestyle’, while another stated that she chose her island based on the fact that it did not have a bridge. In this sense, in-migrants

appreciate life on the islands for what it offers and accept its limitations as a reasonable trade-off:

Here ... every day I can see the sunset, the moon, the stars, and I can swim in front of my house. [In Tokyo], I'd need to go somewhere else to do that. ... for newcomers, if they decide to move to the island it means they already know that life will be different compared to city life (female, in-migration advisor and cafe owner).

*Quality of life through downsized consumption,  
work–life balance and meaningful work*

Another common characteristic across respondents was their understanding of quality of life as decoupled from (superfluous) material consumption. A mindset of voluntary simplicity, characterised by efforts to downsize consumption, an emphasis on localised lifestyles and self-sufficiency, emerged from most of the interviews, although to different degrees. While many interviewees were small business owners, most of them were not motivated by the desire to make substantial profits from their business. Economic sustainability was a tool in the construction of their desired lifestyle, rather than the main goal. Most of the respondents had a clear idea of the (relatively low) amount of money they needed to earn in order to make a living on the island. That amount was their goal, as they hoped to leave the remaining time free to pursue other interests, although this was often more aspiration than reality. As Shinji, another newcomer organic farmer, pointed out,

there is lots of happiness that you can find elsewhere. I want to improve my farming efficiency, to earn the amount of money that is necessary for us to live. When we can reach that point, we can spend our time thinking about other [social and environmental] issues, such as plastic pollution .... Now we are still aiming for that point [where we can make enough money], but afterwards we can do that kind of thing.

In parallel, respondents were also motivated by the perceived possibility of combining work, leisure and family life in a more balanced way. The previously mentioned Masayuki, for example, moved away from Tokyo with his wife and young child after the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, out of a desire to grow safe food and to spend more time with his son. For three years he worked as a member of the local revitalisation team, a period he used to find farmland and to learn how to grow organic produce and raise chickens, aiming to become as food self-sufficient as possible and to eventually make a living through the sale of his farm products. At the same time, however, he also started working two days a week at a radio station in a relatively large city two hours away from his house, a job he found thanks

to his previous experience as a radio host in Tokyo. He describes his two jobs – as a farmer and radio host – as connected to each other and to the experience of living on the island:

It's enjoyable, being involved in agriculture. When I go to work on the radio ..., what I talk about reflects what I learned in the field. I can convey the experience of living in nature ..., of feeling the seasons and the flow of time. It was not the same in the city.

Despite his stated desire to balance family life and work, however, it took some time for Masayuki to achieve the desired balance:

In the first year [of doing farming] I went out early in the morning, I brought lunch with me and stayed there until I went home at night. ... The reason why I moved here was that I wanted to have more time to spend with my family, but I ended up having less time to spend with my family than when I was in Tokyo!

Eventually, he moved to another part of the island, closer to the farmland he had rented, and gave up the idea of becoming a full-time farmer, opting instead to live as a *han-nou han-x<sup>2</sup>* (half farmer, half 'something else'). This hybrid lifestyle gave him some financial security through his part-time job, while at the same time enabling him to uphold his desire of doing farming and being close to his family for most of the week. Like Masayuki, many other respondents had waged part-time jobs in addition to their own businesses, which gave them a measure of financial security.

Cases such as Masayuki's were common among respondents, reflecting the connection between lifestyle migrants' construction of quality of life and the creative bricolage process occurring in their lives. Underpinning all of this are the characteristics of rural areas and rural communities, which facilitate in-migrants' process of assembling and recombining their lives in ways unthinkable in urban areas. First, the characteristics of rural contexts make it considerably easier to engage in activities such as food production, foraging and the reuse of unwanted resources such as abandoned farmland, which form much of respondents' motivations to move to rural areas in the first place. Second, the lower cost of living in rural communities compared to urban areas – in addition to respondents' own downsized needs – considerably facilitates the creative bricolage process. One of the

- 2 A concept popularised by an influential book by Naoki Shiomi (Shiomi, 2003). Shiomi advocates for a pluri-active lifestyle in which individuals spend part of their time engaging in small-scale agriculture for self-sufficiency, and the remaining time engaging in another occupation of their own choice, possibly one 'contributing to society'. Shiomi's work has also been indicated as one of the reasons for the increase in popularity of urban-to-rural lifestyle migration in Japan (Osawa, 2014).

respondents, a craftsman, stated that by living a frugal lifestyle and growing her own food she only needed to spend 12,000 yen per month (approximately 90 euro) to pay for rent and utilities. This situation gives in-migrants freedom to try out new things with relative ease and peace of mind – or, as one respondent put it, with a ‘carefree attitude’ (*karui kimochi*). Third, the closer-knit relationships within rural communities can represent a safety net in difficult times, even for newcomers. As one respondent commented:

I don’t want to borrow money to do what I want to do, I just use my own money. If that money finishes, I stop. ... But if you are in Tokyo, you cannot stop like that because you need a lot of money just to survive. Also, if you have no money, here neighbours will give you vegetables or fruits. But if you are in Tokyo, you don’t have neighbours.

(female, in-migration advisor and cafe owner)

In other words, the characteristics of rural life, combined with in-migrants’ own willingness to adapt and experiment – knowing that it is possible to try things out with relatively few negative consequences – help them shape their life and work in the direction of their desired lifestyle. Shinji’s aspiration for self-sufficiency, however, as well as the account of Masayuki’s trajectory, also show how in-migrants’ quality of life construction is a work in progress, and that reaching the desired balance point can be elusive and subject to frequent renegotiation.

### *Quality of life through deeper social relations*

Another major reason driving lifestyle migrants to the islands was the desire to live more connected lives characterised by stronger social interaction and closeness with others, often contrasted to the alienating feeling of life in large cities. Many respondents, for example, reported an increase in the number of their acquaintances since moving to an island. In most cases, however, in-migrants created stronger social ties with other in-migrants, thanks to the shared experiences and mindsets associated with ‘coming from outside’ and ‘being outsiders’ to the community. Formal and informal networks among in-migrants, either on the same island or on neighbouring ones, were important to obtain practical information and support, and often played a role in attracting new in-migrants to specific islands or communities through social media and word of mouth. In several instances, there was a tendency for in-migrants to cluster, which in turn helps to attract more newcomers, a phenomenon that has been discussed by Zollet and Maharjan (2021) and McGreevy et al. (2021) in the specific context of in-migrant organic farmers’ clusters. Not all in-migrants are the same, however: one of the respondents mentioned that she would like to involve other women who

came to the island after marrying local men in activities for the revitalisation of the local community, but she feels that they do not enjoy the island life as much as she does, since they came solely for marriage, rather than out of interest in the possibilities of rural life itself.

The relationship with local people also plays a crucial role in both migrants' settlement and post-migration's quality of life construction, in both positive and negative ways. Nearly all respondents agreed that access to key resources – most notably housing – was inescapably tied to processes of negotiation with local community members. Despite the astounding number of vacant houses (*akiya*) in rural areas (up to or more than 50 per cent of the total in many settlements), most of these houses are not officially available for rent or sale (Takahashi et al., 2014). Many owners are unwilling to sell or rent out their property even if they do not live on the property anymore, often because the house still contains their family altar and they come back to the house once a year for the Obon festival (the Buddhist festival for honouring the spirits of one's ancestors). Outsiders with no family connections or local acquaintances that can act as go-betweens and guarantors find it very hard to find available housing in liveable condition. In some cases, the process of becoming familiar with the community and earning locals' trust can take a long time, but most respondents described it as necessary and unavoidable. In addition, this system plays an important role in avoiding or slowing down gentrification processes, while at the same time ensuring that newcomers become, at least to some extent, part of the community. Most respondents ended up finding housing through unofficial community connections after living on the island for a while in shared houses, apartments or other temporary accommodation:

There are so many vacant houses, but it's difficult to rent them. However, if you live on the island for a while, you start communicating with the people, which creates a relationship of trust, and then you ask if they are willing to lend the house to you. If you suddenly come and look for a house, they won't lend it to someone they don't know.

(female, community cafe manager)

A similar process applies to farmland, and this helps to explain why gentrification has not been an issue on most of the islands so far, as the local community exerts relatively tight control on who accesses local resources, and there is usually a preference for renting out property rather than selling it. Once a connection has been established, things become much easier for in-migrants, demonstrating the inextricable connection between material resources (e.g. housing) and non-material ones (social networks): 'Sometimes you can find a job, a house or a car on the same day, it's not a rare case. The size of the

island is small enough that people know each other and can connect you quickly and smoothly', one respondent noted.

Building positive relationships with local people was a goal for most respondents, with many being driven to move to rural areas out of the specific desire to contribute to the revitalisation of rural communities through their projects. Several respondents stated that they were trying to create businesses that could provide services to local residents, rather than just to tourists or outside customers. In these cases, in-migrants' construction of quality of life can benefit locals' quality of life as well. At the same time, locals' expectations towards in-migrants may not correspond to the characteristics of newcomers moving into the community (Qu, Coulton & Funck, 2020). This gap can create misunderstandings between locals and in-migrants, which in turn can impact in-migrants' quality of life in the community. Emblematic in this sense is the case of Kaho; born and raised in a large city, she studied languages at university and lived in Australia for five years. When she went back to Japan, she worked for a few years as a translator before deciding to move to a rural area, due to health issues and a dislike for working a traditional company job and being told what to do. She also admitted to not being a 'social' kind of person, which is why she purposefully looked for a remote island community to live in. Kaho learned to make leather crafts, which she sells online and are her current source of income, and tries to live as self-sufficiently as possible by growing much of her own food, making her own clothes and household items, and sourcing what she cannot produce locally. She does not own a car and travels out of the island only a few times a year.

Despite this apparently challenging lifestyle, when asked about the biggest challenge of living on the island her answer was 'getting people's understanding'. For example, her neighbours took issue with her way of growing vegetables. In contrast to the immaculately tidy vegetable gardens of island people, her garden was full of weeds. While for Kaho, who learned permaculture in Australia, weeds are part of the farm system, her neighbours saw them as an eyesore, and she was constantly being told to remove them. While she acknowledges that her neighbours probably meant it in a good way, this clashed with what she wanted to do. Nevertheless, she eventually gave in and started removing the weeds. She changed house three times on the same island due to this kind of pressure, and eventually moved to another island altogether. Another area where she found the relationship with locals to be problematic was that people expected her to live a typical 'Japanese' lifestyle: be married, have kids, a 'real' job and fit in with the community. Even though she moved to the island to escape this kind of conventional lifestyle, she realised that, no matter where, 'in Japan it's good



to be the same as everyone else'. She compared this to her experience with living in Australia, where 'it's good to be different'.

This situation is not uncommon among in-migrants, who often discussed getting well-meaning but overly intrusive advice from locals. This was especially true for female in-migrants, who are scrutinised for being single or not having children, as in Kaho's case or that of other female interviewees. Another issue relates to the various social obligations to participate in communal activities that are typical of Japanese rural communities. These activities can be seen as overly burdensome, as young newcomers are often expected to take part in several of them regardless of their schedule or preferences. Not all in-migrants, however, perceive these activities negatively. According to Ken and Miho, a young couple who opened a cafe,

with a community comes responsibilities. Compared to city life where you can decide how to spend your free time, on the island you have to take part in various group tasks like beach cleaning, festival preparation, voluntary firefighters. It sometimes feels like a chore, but we consider it a 'tax' to live in such a beautiful place.

## Conclusions

This chapter has explored the material and immaterial elements contributing to urban-to-rural lifestyle migrants' quality of life in small Japanese island communities. The findings show the differences between expectations and reality concerning post-migration quality of life once in-migrants settle down in their new community, while also highlighting some differences with lifestyle migration dynamics described in the Western literature. As such, the study adds to our understanding of how lifestyle migrants imagine, perform, reproduce and (re-)negotiate independent lifestyles in peripheral rural communities, including the everyday practices, social relationships and patterns of behaviour that contribute to these processes.

The first aspect discussed in the chapter relates to the material elements that constitute lifestyle migrants' quality of life. The results showed the adaptability of migrants to 'inconvenient' ways of life; on the other hand, they also raise the question of whether these lifestyles can be sustained in the long term, in light of the precarity of the services and infrastructure on the islands threatened by the likely inevitable progression of population decline.

Second, desired lifestyles are hard to achieve in reality, requiring a significant amount of compromise and bricolage. Seeking – and achieving – work–life balance does not always mean 'working less', but rather requires the creation of a suitable mix of activities that bring in-migrants as close as

possible to their desired lifestyles. Also, thanks to the lower cost of living and the closer social relationships with locals and other in-migrants, island and rural communities can become spaces of experimentation for new modes and ways of living driven by a desire for autonomy, self-sufficiency and simpler, downsized lifestyles.

Finally, we have discussed how these desired lifestyles, and the associated quality of life, are inescapably connected to community relations. The closer social relationships characterising small island communities, while helpful in some cases, can also put pressure on in-migrants to conform and ‘fit in’, thus questioning to what extent in-migrants are able to construct lifestyles that go radically against expected conventions. Despite this, however, the trend of urban-to-rural in-migration continues to gain momentum, driven by the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011 first (Klien, 2016) and now by the COVID-19 pandemic. These events are aggravating the sense of ‘crisis’ perceived by young Japanese people, leading increasing numbers of them to reconsider their lives vis-à-vis present and future environmental, health, social and economic risks facing Japan. The popularisation of terms such as I-turn and *han-nou han-x* and policies to support rural in-migrants are also making rural communities more receptive to receiving outsiders, with several places becoming ‘hotspots’ for in-migrants (Klien, 2015; Zollet & Maharjan, 2021). This may also signify that a normalisation of attitudes towards newcomers and their sometimes unconventional lifestyles is underway. It will therefore be important to keep tracking the trajectory of lifestyle migrants’ lives as they negotiate and balance their understanding of quality of life between their own aspirations and those of their families with the local community and their wider social networks. In relation to this, another key topic of future research around urban-to-rural lifestyle migration will be that of trans-migration and ‘relational’ migration (Qu, Coulton, & Funck, 2020), which are becoming increasingly relevant patterns of lifestyle migration in contemporary Japan.

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## 6

# Alaska Native quality of life: culture, rurality and the sacred

*Maria Christina Crouch and Jordan P. Lewis*

### Introduction

Alaska Native (AN) peoples have resided in rural, collectivist systems of being for time immemorial (Napoleon, 2013; Oleksa, 2005). However, AN history has been punctuated by manifold and often generational changes to these systems; family structures, expressions of culture, land-based identities and AN cosmology and ontology are directly impinged upon by colonisation. Evidence of change exists in outward migration, climate change, health disparities and Western systems of health, learning and knowledge (Napoleon, 2013; Oré et al., 2016). Resilience, success and quality of life are evident in community resources, inward migration and the cultural and contextual factors that comprise tribal group identity (Crouch et al., 2020; Rountree & Smith, 2016). All are firmly grounded within place, community strengths and cultural revitalisation, and are embedded in land and nature.

The Norton Sound, a sea inlet dividing the Bering Strait region from the Yukon-Kuskokwin region, is composed of fifteen villages outlying the hub city of Nome. While outlying villages have more homogeneity, Nome reflects more demographic diversity, given its centrality within the region, economic strength and abundance of resources in contrast to more remote locations. A little over half the population of Nome is of AN heritage (58 per cent), and Nome is a seventy-five-minute plane ride from Anchorage, the largest city in Alaska, as there are no roads or trains connecting the two locations (Alaska Department of Community and Regional Affairs [ADCRA], 2017). Within the Bering Strait region, one can only travel by road between Nome and Teller or St Michael and Stebbins, as no other roads or road systems exist. The present between-city road system is not maintained in winter, and between-city travel is typically accomplished through planes from airlines located in Nome, or snowmachines. Flights in or out of Nome are offered once or twice per day and are contingent on weather conditions. While all cities are accessible by plane, Little Diomedé is only accessible by helicopter once a week or every other week. The region varies from rural to highly

rural and remote, and this fact has allowed for many aspects of AN ways of life to continue.

Alaska Native peoples have inhabited the Norton Sound region for time immemorial (Norton Sound Health Corporation [NSHC], 2021). They were and are a thriving culture who flourished within the climate and adapted to the climate to successfully subsist off the land and develop family and community infrastructure. Precolonial and contemporary Norton Sound is home to three distinctly cultural and linguistically diverse AN groups: (1) Inupiaq; (2) Central Yup'ik; and (3) Siberian Yup'ik. While Nome is home to three distinct AN groups, the cultures come together to engage in community events and shared traditions. Activities include beading, dancing, ivory carvings, sewing (for example, skin, fabric, fur) and traditional drumming and singing. However, with the arrival of European and religious settlers with the intent of colonisation, the tribal ways of life in Nome and the region became irreversibly disrupted. Like most if not all other places across Alaska, the Norton Sound region was greatly impacted, with some places being decimated by disease, and others being generationally wounded by traumas. Economic, communal, familial and spiritual structures were changed, and people were expected to assimilate. Nome, known by the Indigenous residents in the Inupiaq language as Sit̄jasuaq/Sit̄nasuak, was 'established' on 9 April 1901 (ADCRA, 2017; NSHC, 2021). Settler-colonial establishment was a direct result of westward expansion spurred by the finding of gold within the Sound by Scandinavian travellers. With them came thousands of other people seeking the fortunes of the touted next Eldorado. One million dollars of gold was mined in the first two months. The population of Nome dropped drastically by 1910 due to resources being depleted, and decreased further during the flu epidemic in 1918. Relatedly, the catalyst for what is known today as the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race was a diphtheria outbreak requiring life-saving anti-toxin. Since 1974 the race has been a mainstay of Alaskan culture and an economic wellspring for Nome. However, while tourism boosts the economy, outsiders fill up all the hotels and are known to drink heavily during this time. This perpetuates old historical wounds, has put vulnerable women at an increased risk of assault and creates a period of time when AN people from outlying villages have little ability to access Nome or the integrative medical system.

Nevertheless, the AN people in the Norton Sound region are persistent and resilient. The warm summers and fertile soil are optimal for harvesting traditional foods from the land (NSHC, 2021). Subsistence has been a way of life for inhabitants of the Norton Sound region from before colonisation to the present day. The land provides a variety of plant and animal species to utilise for food, clothing, revenue and more. Subsistence is part of daily life across the region but is contingent on location and availability. People who



live inland have a diet rich in caribou, bear, moose and fish. Coastal diets include sea mammals like walrus and seal in addition to caribou and fish. Those who live on the islands have diets high in foods from the sea like crab and fish along with seasonal foods like fowl, berries and plants. The people of Nome subsist on hunting, crabbing, fishing, berry picking, gathering traditional greens and trading of foods. Nome provides seal, caribou, moose, musk ox, ptarmigan, duck, geese and brown bears. The tasty salmon and plethora of berries including blue, black, salmon and cranberries provide valuable items of trade to people of the region who have whale and other foods not available. This has been and continues to be a function of rural living and a tool for increasing nutrition and diversifying the diet of AN peoples. However, it is estimated most inhabitants in the region are at or below poverty level. Resident income is comprised of both money and subsistence. Many AN peoples throughout the region supplement their income by making and selling art to people in other regions, the local gift shop in Nome, at craft fairs or community events, and even by selling their art online to people in other parts of the state, the nation and the world.

### **Alaska Native historical context**

Alaska Native peoples and Tribes have rich cultures signified by strength, resilience and growth in the face of historical and contemporary traumas (Peter, 2008). Alaska Native culture has been rooted in the natural environment and within rural communities. Notably, there existed precolonial ontology, pedagogy and epistemology for all aspects of life, such as medicine, surgery, diet, meteorology and astronomy, to name but a few (John, 2010; Napoleon, 2013). Tribe and community thrived in regional communication and cooperation and intertribal modes of trade for knowledge, culture, art and goods that sustained the fabric of daily life (Napoleon, 2013; Peter, 2008). While intertribal tension existed and strife was inevitable, these were dealt with through intertribal spiritual and cultural norms and rules predicated on Elder wisdom and tradition. The AN timeline occurred naturally and organically through adaptation, change and the normative process of personal, communal and regional evolution and growth. Moreover, land and nature, which are inseparable from Tribe or body, were also integral aspects that facilitated community as much as the people themselves. However, the interconnected, dynamic and viable process of the AN way of life was permanently altered by the arrival of European settlers to rural Alaska.

The AN community has undoubtedly been disrupted by forces of colonisation and trauma (Gone, 2007; Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn,

1998; Yurkovich & Lattergrass, 2008). These traumas to person, group and land have been a stark reality for AN peoples, with the influx of Russian colonisers in the 1700s and the colonial migration of European settlers and churches in the 1800s and beyond. Western domination was an act of denigrating the AN culture, while simultaneously promulgating and proselytising Western culture and norms. These include, but are not limited to, fossil fuels, urbanisation, Christianity, the English language and small nuclear family systems that viewed land as separate and ownable, arguably also people as separate and ownable. While AN peoples are widely diverse in culture, values, traditions and regions, all share a common experience of separation and destruction to family and community through forced boarding schools, religious indoctrination, cultural and dietary changes and mass death due to diseases (Bassett et al., 2014). Religious sects organised and settled in different parts of Alaska. Families, communities and tribal healers and leaders were separated as a tool to dismantle AN culture for generations. Through an ongoing process of assimilation, colonisation threatened to rip AN peoples from their communal and natural roots and replace the fabric of society with systems, practices and values that were foreign and incongruent to sustain rural AN life. However, these historical facts are not confined to history, as historical traumas have informed and manipulated contemporary contexts (for example, discrimination, racism, marginalisation, health disparities; Gone, 2007; Lewis et al., 2014).

Western frameworks of quality of life, successful ageing and well-being could not then nor can now provide a full view of what it means to be an AN person, often referred to as the human beings or the real humans. Alaska Native culture is understood through the lens of connections and linkages that transcend time, space and dimension (Lewis et al., 2014). Some legends, stories and histories are literal and some are figurative, but they are all pathways to understanding greater truths for daily living. In AN culture there is the belief that there are those who are going through the motions of life, do not know who they truly are and are asleep (for example, those who experience substance abuse; John, 2010). On the other hand, there are those who are fully awake/aware/becoming aware to who they are, to their spirituality (the spirituality of the multiverse), and who live cognisant of what was before, what is now and what is after. This is a direct expression of one's culture and a contextual understanding is integral to fully realising the intersection of person and place as a construction of worldview. Moreover, AN culture is a function of rurality, inasmuch as tribal people belong to the land on which they originate and have strong value systems rooted in a mutual and beneficial connection and caregiving relationship.

## Cultural trauma

Cultural trauma is a salient historical and contemporary reality for people the world over, and for the first time this century in a shared global context, given the current and changing nature of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Cultural trauma broadly occurs when a community/group has had collective experiences/events that are damaging to identity and quality of life (Alexander et al., 2004). Inasmuch as the trauma is a wound on the person(s), it is also an internalisation of responsibility that can both perpetuate and/or alleviate the hurt. For example, Indigenous Tribes in the United States have long recognised postcolonial distress and strived to find culturally grounded and derived means for collective healing (Kirmayer et al., 2014), whereas many outside entities often do not consider fully or acknowledge the historical traumas that cultures have incurred (for example, slavery, holocaust, internment) to the detriment of these communities' emancipatory sovereignty. Trauma is situated in culture as much as healing, however; there are gravitational forces greater than them both in the way of sociopolitical structures, laws and systems that are beyond the scope of this discussion but are imperative to note. As sources of trauma(s) become artefacts, 'collective identity will be rooted in sacred places and structured in ritual routines' (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 23). Collectivist communities, within both the AN context and culture, are predominantly rural in nature, and within the US rurality provides some protective factors towards one's quality of life and against traumas that could otherwise be identity-intrusive, collective, cumulative and/or intergenerational (Kirmayer et al., 2014; Suarez, 2016).

Given that data has shown that there are myriad factors associated with differences in quality of life across rural and urban contexts, a recent study (Oh et al., 2021) analysed data from the RAND American Life Panel of 2,554 participants, which reflected a representative sample of the US population aged 17 years and older. The researchers looked at how birthplace (that is, large urban, small urban, suburban, rural) was associated with mental health issues, such as anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mood disorders. They found that overall urbanicity was significantly associated with greater odds of developing a psychiatric disorder than being born in a rural environment. Prior research, global and the US alone, found urban environments have an associative link between environment and poor mental health outcomes (Krabbendam et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2019). Contributing factors of psychiatric disorders/distress within urban environments include environmental pollution, overcrowding and population density, social distress (for example, social isolation, lack of free time, exposure to violence) and lack of access to natural environment (for

example, trees, grass, open water). Even AN Elder research has found that moving to an urban environment and the lack of traditional resources such as plants, food, running water, fresh air and space to be on the land and practice cultural activities (for example, hunting, fishing, gathering) is deleterious to AN quality of life and successful ageing (Lewis, 2010). Further, while suicide risk is often a salient associative risk and concern for rural residents, research (Thorne et al., 2017) suggests that PTSD symptomology that leads to taking one's life is more likely to be associated with being raised in an urban environment as opposed to a rural environment. While the complexities of urban and rural life are not easily summed as either-or, good versus bad, protective versus harmful, it is important to both acknowledge the disparities that exists for those in rural environments (for example, lack of resources, healthcare inequity) and to recognise the innate and generative quality of life that is embedded in rurality. To further understand culture, cultural trauma and resilience, central to and inseparable from the context of rurality, AN quality of life and an AN framework is used.

### Quality of life and rurality

In order to understand AN quality of life from the ground up, a sample of AN adults (N=15) within rural Alaska was recruited to share their collective and lived realities related to their quality of life (Crouch et al., 2020). Participants engaged in a community-based participatory process from recruitment through dissemination. Focus groups consisted of interactive tasks and thematic analyses. Through the Goodness of Life for Every Alaska Native (GLEAN) Study, nine salient themes were revealed: (1) Family represented connections and systems of support; (2) Subsistence emphasised the importance of traditions and land-based survival; (3) Access to Resources focused on community resilience in the face of adversity and change; (4) Health and Happiness reflected the holistic, contextual and intersectional dimensions of living well; (5) Traditional Knowledge and Values was comprised of identity, beliefs and practices that reinforce culture; (6) Acts of Self is focused on sovereignty and interdependence; (7) Providing included reciprocity, self-determination and prosperity; (8) Sobriety was focused on a holistic balance and temperance; (9) Healing emphasised the cyclical and grounded nature of collective resilience and reclamation of Indigenous ways. To fully understand the salience of the themes, one must first consider the place-based culture, knowing and natural environment of the study location: The Norton Sound region of Alaska.

Thus, the GLEAN Study explored the rich and robust AN cultural practice of daily rural life in the Norton Sound region of Alaska (Crouch et al.,

2020). This research resulted in nine AN quality of life themes, the first of which was Family. Participants described it as representing all of one's connections to plant, animal and person and the intersections therein. One person stated that 'you're alive when you're with your family'. Another said that family is the context and those that comprise it, calling it 'the family community'. Participants endorsed family as an expression of AN traditional values, saying, 'Basically, the tradition of helping others, and if we see people who need, just give, don't ask. Well, you know, give it back. What we gave them [will] be up to them, but don't go after them for what you gave them.' A reciprocity, sharing and value of taking care of self, others and the land were integral aspects of what it means to be a family member and to maintain the family and thus the community. Family is also closely tied to place and nature. One participant said, 'Family always goes camping together and do stuff together. Or the whole village always gets together.' Another shared, 'My family loves to go out in the country and I teach them what's edible from what's washed ashore from the sea and what's on the land.' Further, a participant stated, '[Family] is healthy food. Native food is healthier than store-bought food. I want to teach my child how to smoke salmon like I did ... build a smokehouse and all that stuff. The last couple of years I've tried to teach my cousin's kids how to make a stove out of a drum.' Other participants discussed the impacts to rural AN life and family sustained through urbanisation and reliance on Western goods and ways of life, stating 'Seems like if we're not teaching our kids, seems like the value of trying to teach them what things are and what to get from the country. They probably don't know how to look for even mussels, or, you know, things like that.' Another said 'When I had my own kids, I never bought those instant things, or those Hot Pockets and anything like that, or even canned things. I never went for those, but nowadays it's the canned vegetables or the frozen one, but I can't get used to buying those stuff yet.' Climate change, Westernisation and outward migration all were noted as playing a part in changing and threatening AN culture, which has been supported by rural living, nutrition, animal and land.

The theme of Subsistence was integral and viewed as maintaining and facilitating AN quality of life. One participant equated subsistence and natural health to that of their own bodily health: 'Our good health would be more like trying to find good food when you're at camp, fishing, hunting, that kind of stuff.' Subsistence was not only comprised of nature, exercise and food, it also represented clothing, luxury and necessity; one participant shared, '[The Elders] always have something useful, and they would make beaver hats or mittens, seal-skin mittens, seal-skin hats.' Conversely, poor quality of life was viewed as lack of access to nature, land and traditional ways of life; a participant added, 'like your sadness might be you did poor

hunting, poor camping'. Quality of life is inherent in cultural practices and particularly food, a spiritual and symbolic act of ingesting one's traditional knowledge and of successful ageing. One participant said, 'My mom lived to be 93 because she was mostly eating Native food. She couldn't stand eating a store-bought one. One of my nephews, when they put him in the hospital [in Anchorage, the big city] he started puking because he can't stand eating that food.' Another woman talked about the impacts of industrialisation on the climate and ecosystems of her rural village:

About four years ago our young boys they moved down the coast, and then they didn't even know how to butcher the Beluga [whale] because we never used to get Beluga because of that tower down [river]. I think it was a radar tower. But it monitored all of the marine traffic out there in the waters. So it had a signal or something and my husband would say it wouldn't allow the Belugas to come into our harbour here. But since they tore that tower down, they started to finally see Belugas and Gray whales coming back.

The theme of Access to Resources represented the disconnection from traditional rural life and the reliance on Western systems for healthcare, food, clothes, economic stability, transportation, clean water, energy, heat and housing, to name a few. One participant observed, 'it seems like it's a struggle to survive'. Another said, 'as I got older it seemed like everything is out of struggle now'. Many talked about Western responses to trauma that are not part of AN traditional ways, such as alcohol and tobacco. One participant shared about the intergenerational deficits created by colonisation and the outward migration of youth and adults alike: '[Elders] they can't hunt and fish for themselves anymore, so I just try to help them get whatever they need, like fish and things.' Another said, 'Our Elders used to always say life is going to be harder after we live our lives, and we get older. They said we better get back to our older ways.' Participants also talked about the Western barriers imposed on natural resources that exists within the rural environment:

but with the high gas prices nowadays and transportation and the amount of food you'd need, it's getting harder and harder to haul stuff 15 miles down [river] and hope you have everything you need, and nobody gets hurt. And [hope] you don't get stuck down there. When the Coast Guard station was down there, our residents had to get permission to land down there to go to camp.

One participant defined the theme of Health and Happiness as 'Stay out of trouble, be strong in situations, or try to be. Be happy, have a good attitude towards others, be kind, have fun ... going to camp, walking on the beach ... be honest, be helpful to others and yourself. Be yourself.' Another viewed the theme as intergenerational sharing and spirituality stating, 'My husband's grandma and his Uncle Joe, they were very spiritual and

traditional. His great-uncle used to let me sit down at the table [and] ... just teach me stuff.' Many viewed health and happiness as 'creature comforts', leisure activities, exercise, having fun with others (for example, playing, laughing), expressions of love and taking a perspective of positivity, all of which were a function of being within community and sharing with one another. Moreover, one's health and happiness were contingent on the overall health and happiness of the community.

The theme of Traditional Knowledge and Values was closely aligned with Health and Happiness, as it is AN knowledge and values that are the blueprint of how and why one is to be healthy and happy. Traditional knowledge and values are the basis for quality of life, reflect community-held beliefs and wisdom and stand as a guidepost for AN lifestyle and lifecycle. One participant said that traditional knowledge and values have 'got to be something within yourself', and another stated that they have the power to 'change the younger generation [for the better]'. Others shared their explicit traditional teachings: 'Help an Elder, always help an Elder, always'; teach the children 'to cut fish and how to hang fish'; and 'you need to save for the winter ... because winters are hard sometimes and you just need to try and, at least, think about winter when you're hunting and fishing'. Traditional knowledge and values was inextricably linked to AN Elder wisdom about how to live well, long and successfully. One participant who was himself an Elder shared, 'I learn a lot from the Elders, too. I still learn a lot from them.'

Acts of Self was a theme that reflected intra- and interdependence and tribal sovereignty. It was closely associated with Sobriety, which was a theme named by the participants but was used to reflect a harm-reduction approach, balance, temperance and holistic health. Participants defined Acts of Self as 'keeping control of your own actions'; goal setting and 'setting good goals'; to 'think about the future'; and 'enjoying the benefits' of one's positive choices. Another participant said that it's 'to be honest. You have to be honest to yourself before you can be honest to somebody else.' Participants declared that both acts of self and sobriety were to 'avoid self-indulgence on alcohol and drugs'. Speaking to their own sobriety a participant said,

[Sobriety] is what keeps me going. Back when I was young too, even before I was 17, I used to drink a lot and party because of peer pressure. All my cousins drink ... and I finally got tired of it and went to [alcohol treatment] last year and graduated. So staying sober was probably one of the best things that happened to me.

Another participant shared,

But staying sober is probably the best thing, because my dad had died. His liver and kidneys shut down from drinking too much ... He was pretty young, too.

This was like 20-something years ago. So, I'm almost the same age as when he died, and I just wanted to see if I could live a little bit longer than he did.

Many acknowledge that drugs and alcohol were not a traditional way of life and not a legacy they wanted to pass down to younger generations; rather, they wanted to teach the youth how to subsist from the land, use traditional practices to stay healthy and to foster a strong sense of cultural self.

The theme of Providing represented taking care of family/community, self-determination and AN advancement. Participants viewed providing in terms of financial and job security, a positive attitude and mentality, and securing traditional plants, medicines and foods. Speaking to this, one participant said,

I bought my daughter some tablets and she has her own iPhone ... but I'm trying to keep her out in the country, too, because she likes to go camping now. She likes it. Camping [and being at the cabin]. I just gave it to her, so it's her cabin. So we've got to try to keep it clean and try to stay busy there in the summertime.

Another stated, 'It makes me feel good to take care of my family and knowing that I'm there to cook for them and do their laundry.' Participants discussed the importance of providing a traditional way of life. They endorsed hunting and gathering from the land to provide for spring/summer/fall and for the longer winter months in order to take care of both family and community.

The last theme, Healing, was used by one focus group to represent an overarching theme for all other themes. It reflects the importance of safety, cultural revitalisation and reclamation, and AN resilience and healing from past traumas. Specifically, participants discussed AN spirituality, religion and/or church as sources of hope and strength. A participant stated, 'Yeah, faith. Yeah, pray, because that's what keeps me going. Praying ... because I know I'll feel better.' Another shared, 'I learned something not too long ago from my oldest daughter. She said don't worry about things because there's somebody that can do your worrying. I asked her, who? She said, the [Creator] will take care of you. You don't have to worry and make yourself sick.' The last focus group said that healing was 'knowing that everything is safe. We know that our family is safe. We know that our bills [are paid] and there's food on the table. And we know that other people care for us.' Additionally, healing also exemplified a spirit of community sharing and helping; AN people were regarded as being responsible for their own and community needs. A participant said, 'Help others like people who don't do subsistence or don't have the care to do their subsistence. I offered them to help me so that they can get their share. Or when someone is depressed, you talk to them to bring their spirits up.'



### **Culture, community and rurality**

Culture is everything; it is the construction of who one is, becoming and how they came to be. The relational self, which is oneself within a particular context, speaks to the broader concepts of independence and interdependence (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). These two concepts are themselves interconnected, on a continuum, and can be expressed within one's culture. Consider the following postulation: people in any cultural context gradually develop through socialisation a set of cognitive, emotional and motivational processes that enable them to function well – naturally, flexibly and adaptively – in the types of situations that are common and recurrent in the cultural context (Kitayama et al., 1997, p. 1245). This is to say that culture facilitates the construction of self and self in relation to others. For example, a person from a predominantly interdependent cultural context (a rural environment) who lives in a predominantly independent cultural context (an urban environment) has a unique set of values, skills and social conceptualisations that may not translate. Therefore, the culture of rurality is inextricably linked to that of AN peoples.

Culture and community are inherent protective factors, and strengths are embedded in traditional knowledge and values (Burack et al., 2007; MacDonald et al., 2013; Tafoya, 2014). Culture is expressed through community and exists within interpersonal relationships, family and nature. These collective pathways increase holistic health and quality of life; 'health is not only an outcome in and of itself, but also a determinant for overall community health and cohesion and is directly and intimately tied to other aspects of community health and wellbeing' (MacDonald et al., 2013, p. 12). In other words, the quality of one's life is inseparable from the health and success of one's Tribe, community, culture and land, and it is a direct expression of who one is and from whom and where they have come. Quality of life is in many ways maintained by people fully being themselves as human beings in spite of and even because of adversities (Napoleon, 2013). Thus, Indigenous quality of life is an expression of resilience, as it demonstrates holistic health and healing in the face of adversity by engagement and reclamation through cultural practices and strengths as follows: sharing or learning one's Native language, intergenerational learning, peer support, storytelling, parenting children through traditional ways and being involved in tribal and community activities. Moreover, shared 'cultural values, beliefs, and practices are a source of strength, power, medicine, and healing' (Oré et al., 2016, p. 148).

Notably, resilience does not mean quality of life alone (Burack et al., 2007). While one might be successful in the Western world, one may still be experiencing deficits within and across indices of AN quality of life. Rather, AN quality of life may involve achieving balance across both Western domains

and the often marginalised AN domains, such as traditional knowledge, practices and spirituality (Crouch et al., 2020; John, 2010). When quality of life is viewed as reclamation and enculturation, it can be both a measurement tool and a device for awakening one's culture (Garrett & Garrett, 1994; Goodkind et al., 2015; John, 2010). Counter to the common belief that Indigenous traditions are a hindrance to Western success, research has demonstrated that Indigenous culture strengthens and facilitates success and well-being within both a Western industrialised context and a non-Western more rural context (Dockery, 2010). Further, AN culture is the cornerstone to AN quality of life and cannot be separated from place. A paucity of AN quality of life measures and conceptualisation exists in the literature (Crouch et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2013; Wolsko et al., 2006); however, an enormity of data exists as traditional knowledge and values, shared stories and wisdom-based worldviews, lifestyles and practices. Critically, AN peoples are the cultural bearers of their knowledge and they themselves are the storehouses of their own histories. Therefore, it is imperative AN quality of life, central to rural being, be examined with these in mind.

### **Successful ageing in a rural context**

Just as climates alter community, the topography of land shifts and culture expands to accommodate change, AN quality of life is not constrained by the lifecycle. Rather, quality of life is nuanced and amplified by AN values, knowledge, practices and Elder wisdom. Research (Hopkins et al., 2016; Lewis, 2011, 2016; Lewis et al., 2020) demonstrates how AN Elder knowledge, intergenerational connection and generativity and indigenised tenets of successful ageing exemplify how rural AN communities become and stay well, and pass on healing and wellness to future generations. The lens of Indigenous ageing is a view into the barriers that exist in living rurally and the dire need to continue a rural, AN way of life. In order to examine successful ageing in AN populations, research relied upon surveys and interviews with a purposive sample of fifteen AN adults ranging in age from 26 to 84 and representing six different AN tribal groups (Lewis, 2010). Half of the participants were from an urban environment (n=8) and the other from a rural (n=8) environment. The researcher found that there were notable differences between environments, with rural participants reporting traditional living, staying in balance with nature and an active lifestyle as an integral part of successful ageing. Urban participants reported access to healthy foods, time with friends and exercise as parts of successful ageing. While both are similar, each highlights the adaptation to new environments (for example, rural to urban) and the intersectionality of place and expression

of Indigenous ways of knowing. Comparatively, while rural participants reported their access to land and traditional practices as their biggest advantages, the urban participants listed those very facets of Indigenous life as lacking within their environment. All participants viewed Elders as the source of knowledge and wisdom within the community and entrusted them with the task of teaching the community how to age successfully.

Overall, participants reported the integral parts of successful ageing to be the sharing of knowledge between generations, staying holistically active and the connection to others, land and the rural community. It was noted that there was ‘hardly any mention of health care’ or basing successful ageing on ‘health status’ (Lewis, 2010, p. 392). These results suggest that AN peoples require culturally competent and contextualised treatment and caregiving regardless of Western conceptualisations of disease; over-pathologising of AN peoples could potentially be counterproductive to long-term healthcare utilisation and outcomes. In addition, the findings posit that globalisation, urbanisation and acculturation are sources of breakages in the traditional AN ways of life (Lewis, 2010; Lewis et al., 2020). In other words, while AN culture is persistent, resilient and powerful, it has been threatened by the overt efforts of historical and contemporary oppression and the persistent push to modernise and move from traditional, rural life. Through the process of colonisation there has been a disruption in the natural order of life, and through improving eldership, revitalising cultural practices and restoring traditional ways of being and living, one has the opportunity to undo past hurts, promote healing and make space for success as one moves towards holistic well-being among the nine culturally grounded domains of AN quality of life (Crouch et al., 2020).

While rural Alaska continues to undergo rapid sociocultural changes, the land and its people continue to thrive, reminding us of the resilience within AN peoples. As AN peoples continue to experience inward and outward migration, the quality of life in rural Alaska is higher given the strong connection to land, which gives AN peoples their identity, spirit, nourishment and well-being. Through this analysis of the historical and contemporary impacts and changes within the AN cultural system of being and functioning, a holistic framework of understanding the meaning and embeddedness of quality of life in a rural AN context can be fully realised.

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# Part II

The built environment





## Framing essay II

*Anne Tietjen and Jens Kaae Fisker*

### Introduction

This essay frames a critical examination of interventions in the built environment with an eye to their role in constructing rural quality of life. Importantly, this includes the (potential) role of planning and spatial design to enable rural places to flourish and to enhance individual and collective well-being. The framing takes its point of departure in a situated and relational understanding of well-being, where people, things and places are assembled in everyday encounters and well-being is conceived of as an effect arising from such complex assemblages. The chapters in [Part I](#) have already provided insights into the relation between well-being and everyday rural life. In [Part II](#) we build on this grounding to address more specifically interactions between everyday life, rural planning and the built environment.

The places of rural life have changed dramatically in the past generation, driven by globalisation, urbanisation and environmental change (Woods, 2019). New uses and competing societal demands for rural space promote conflicting ideas about rurality and broaden the scope of rural planning (Gkartzios et al., 2022). While the ongoing transformation of built environments and landscapes is putting a strain on rural life in many places, place-based spatial development, especially through participatory processes of placemaking, is increasingly being viewed as a means not only to achieve attractive and functional built environments but to promote a sense of community, place attachment, social cohesion, and to help stimulate local economies – in short to enhance rural dwellers' quality of life and well-being (Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2018). The logic involved in this trend reflects an old trope of planning rationality, where interventions in the built environment are believed to be capable of enhancing human well-being by providing a material environment which is more conducive to human flourishing. Instead of taking this for granted, we want to critically examine how such interventions affect rural places and (possibilities of) rural life and how this may contribute to quality of life, while remaining open to the possibility that they are not always capable of doing so.

Drawing on a situated and relational understanding of well-being, we treat rural built environments and landscapes and their transformation as co-creators of relational spaces of well-being and becoming. This is inspired by Sarah Atkinson's (2013, p. 137) deliberately ambiguous framing of well-being as 'an effect, dependent on the mobilisation of resources from everyday encounters with complex assemblages of people, things and places'; in this way well-being can be defined and examined as 'stable and amenable to change, as individual and collective and as subjective and objective' (see also Atkinson et al., 2012). From this shared vantage point, chapter authors investigate built interventions in rural places made by local communities, planners, architects and policymakers, and driven by aims that explicitly emphasise quality of life. The purpose of this framing essay is to set the scene for this, to prepare the reader for what (not) to expect, and to highlight the most relevant interconnections between chapters.

### **Are interventions in the built environment always beneficial to the quality of life?**

**Part II** opens with an intervention by Mark Scott, who makes the case for a rural planning paradigm in which human well-being and quality of life are placed front and centre as the primary aim and guiding light for planning. This is based on the simple principle that spatial planning ought to be about making places better for people. As his review of rural planning shows, however, this has not always been the case in the countryside. For instance, an ethos of preservation has often prevailed in which farmland and landscape quality preservation has been prioritised to the neglect and detriment of the social dimensions of rural places. Likewise, agricultural interests have often dominated the shaping of rural futures, which in turn has tended to marginalise socially progressive planning practices. Instead, Scott encourages us to consider the tangible and intangible built environment factors that contribute to quality of life and how these vary across different types of rural places from the almost urban to the most remote. Drawing on a range of examples from across Europe, he shows how planning interventions may both enhance and erode quality of life. Appreciating that rural planning and built environment interventions also risk having detrimental effects on human well-being is an important step towards a better understanding of their potential to improve quality of life.

The following chapters take up this thread more concretely by looking closely at specific instances of interventions in the built environment in very different settings around the world. Each in their own way, these chapters grapple with the following questions: Do such interventions actually fulfil

their purpose and deliver on the promise to make life better, and if so, how? If not, why do they fail? Under which circumstances do they become counterproductive and why? To do so they also explore the implications of built interventions with the physical changes to the material rural fabric comprising only the most obviously visible side. Often, however, the invisible side is just as important: the processes and projects through which built interventions come about reach much further into the social fabric of communities. In this sense, the interventions under scrutiny are not merely concerned with the material environment of rural places but also intervene in the goings-on of everyday rural life that comprised the topic in [Part I](#). The combination of findings from [parts I](#) and [II](#) thus allow us to provide a more informed basis for future rural planning and policy-making. This includes not only questions of how to intervene, but also the overlooked question of how not to intervene; as disruptions, interventions cannot be assumed to always be beneficial. What we have tasked authors with, then, is to critically scrutinise the ways in which interventions instigate new relationships between people, things and places. A key question that this entails is by and for whom are rural spaces of well-being created, and who are being overlooked or excluded in their production? This, again, harks back to the critical framing of [Part I](#).

### From rural planning to place-based, participatory projects

In the first in-depth empirical exploration of interventions in the built environment, Anne Tietjen and Gertrud Jørgensen introduce us to the plethora of place-based participatory projects that have been carried out in Denmark in areas affected by population loss. They present an encompassing inventory of such projects and provide detailed insights about a smaller selection, showing what changes local communities make to their built environments to enhance quality of life and community well-being, and what these changes do. The reader will do well to pay special attention to the ways in which project communities were often seen to outlast the projects themselves, sometimes with long-term placemaking effects. This ought to prompt questions about what we focus on when assessing acts of physical planning and design: is it only about changes associated directly with the built environment or should we perhaps pay more attention to how projects intervene in the sociality of rural communities as well? Regarding rural quality of life, both aspects would seem relevant.

Juaneé Cilliers and Menini Gibbens address the complexity of placemaking and its relation to rural quality of life by attending to the development of child-friendly spaces in impoverished South African communities

with a predominantly young population. If rural planning and placemaking is to prioritise quality of life – the argument made earlier by Scott – whose quality of life and whose spaces should be prioritised, and where does that leave child-friendly spaces in prioritisation dilemmas in places that also desperately need basic infrastructure? In their empirical exploration of this, the authors employ both a child’s and an adult’s perspective, thus opening for critical scrutiny whose perspective on rural places gets to count in rural placemaking. A more general corollary of this chapter is that different rural spaces, different living conditions and different views on rural quality of life also entail different requirements for placemaking policy and practices.

These insights are worth bearing in mind when accompanying Meiqin Wang on an extended visit to the Longtan village in China. The village has been the setting for an art-led intervention which has been sustained over a longer time period to revitalise a poor, depopulated village as a heritage and tourism destination. The intervention followed a logic in which art was assumed to be capable of enabling a local transformation which, among other things, would enhance quality of life for village residents. As such the chapter prompts us to think critically about the implications that such an assumption may have on how the intervention unfolds and especially how local residents respond to it. This connects to broader questions concerning local and extra-local agency and the uncritical export of urban ideas to rural areas.

### **The production of rural winners and losers**

The last two chapters in [Part II](#) both take on the difficult questions associated with the ways in which rural planning and policy-making may contribute to the production of rural winners and losers. Nick Gallent explores this through a perspective on affordable rural housing, taking up the thread on gentrification started by Martin Phillips and colleagues in [Part I](#). Gallent employs a domain-based view which emphasises the intersections between housing and a range of life domains including home life, work life, social life and community life. This forces us to reflect on how the (un)availability of affordable housing has implications for rural quality of life that reach across all these domains rather than being confined to home life alone. Looking at housing development in rural England, the chapter affords insights into how processes of rural gentrification may affect rural quality of life, while also beginning to identify pathways out of the problem.

With Nils Björling in the last chapter, the theme of winners and losers is taken up again by looking at the *longue durée* development of the Swedish welfare state and the stark geographical divides between prospering cities

and declining countryside that have emerged from it. Instead of getting caught by the binary terms of his account, however, Björling uses it as a point of departure for identifying what he calls ‘the rurban void’ which is produced precisely by the polarised forces pulling Swedish society apart along the rural–urban interface. Illustrated by a number of cases, the chapter outlines emerging alternative spatial development practices in the rurban void that take place outside the realm of official planning practice and can open new avenues for planning for rural quality of life.

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## Spatial planning and rural quality of life

*Mark Scott*

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the role of spatial planning in enhancing or eroding quality of life in rural regions and localities. Planning is central to the spatial governance of rural territories in terms of managing spatial change processes, balancing competing and emerging demands for rural space, and guiding the use of land as a fundamental rural resource that underpins the rural economy and essential rural social infrastructure, such as housing supply. This role within the rural land-use system is also critical in addressing global environmental imperatives, such as climate disruption, biodiversity and habitat loss and food and energy security. However, spatial planning theory and practice are often dominated by an overwhelming focus on urban places, with planners perceiving rural places as agricultural domains or as scenic backdrops, and thus as places to protect from encroaching development pressure, which often neglects the social dimensions of the rural.

This chapter argues that rural planning has been dominated by narrow and unimaginative agendas leading to a marginalisation of socially progressive planning practices. To address this deficit, this chapter explores the potential role of planning to enable rural places to flourish through adopting a well-being perspective. It explores the emergence of well-being and quality of life as a public policy goal, increasingly adopted as an alternative approach to traditional measures of economic performance such as productivity or household income. The chapter then examines how well-being and quality of life perspectives have been translated to spatial planning debates; however, notably, this emerging practice tends to focus on measurement and monitoring in terms of planning outcomes with limited attention to the interrelationships between various well-being domains or the causal mechanisms at play. Moreover, indicators used for measurement are often more relevant to urban places than tailored to rural experiences. To address these limitations, the chapter draws on the author's collaboration with Menelaos Gkartzios and Nick Gallent in developing a *rural*

*capitals framework* to address the connections between ‘capitals’ or rural resources and the potential role of spatial planning in ‘converting’ these capitals towards a *countryside of well-being* (Gkartzios et al., 2022). To contextualise this discussion, the chapter first charts the limitations of established rural planning logics or narratives to identify the rationale for a well-being perspective.

### Rural planning logics: an unimaginative agenda

Definitions of planning have changed over time and vary considerably across the world and inevitably reflect specific governance and institutional traditions. On a basic level, Healey refers to planning activity as being about ‘making better places’ (2010), which applies equally to rural and urban localities. However, as described by Lapping and Scott (2019), from the mid-twentieth century, planning theory and practice in the global North became increasingly focused on urban issues with rural planning (and by extension, rural places) playing a more marginal role, often focused on narrow development paths reflecting context-specific political priorities. To illustrate this, synthesised from the literature, I identify four alternative (illustrative rather than exhaustive) stylised rural planning logics that highlight the narrow and unimaginative rural planning agenda found across many countries: (1) *preservationist* rural planning; (2) *developmentalist* rural planning; (3) *laissez-faire* approaches; and (4) *neoliberalised* rural planning.

The tone for preservationist rural planning for much of the twentieth century, particularly in core, highly urbanised regions, was established in the 1920s with Patrick Abercrombie’s seminal work *The Preservation of Rural England* (Abercrombie, 1926), influential both in terms of his analysis of the rural condition and also in relation to his policy prescription. In this work, Abercrombie identifies aspects of early twentieth-century rural transformation that continue to resonate strongly with the contemporary countryside: a concern with urban sprawl, people ‘colonising’ the countryside, the impacts of increasing car ownership and mobility, and the countryside as a consumption space, particularly for recreation and second-home ownership. From this analysis, two key policy imperatives were established: first, the preservation of agricultural land, and second, the preservation of the countryside and landscape on aesthetic grounds.

Despite being rooted in a specific rural context (England), Abercrombie’s framing of rural planning was hugely significant in setting the rural planning agenda for much of the twentieth century and was deeply influential to the professional ideology of the planner and in establishing an enduring preservation ethos underpinning rural planning practice. As Curry and Owen



(2009) note, this ‘no development ethic’ framed physical development in the countryside as an environmental detractor. From a US perspective, Lapping (2006) also charts a similar trajectory whereby planners have focused on (and largely unquestioned) the protection of the family farm, farmland preservation and amenity protection as key planning priorities. In many regards, key rural planning policies emerged from countries that had experienced rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in the early decades of the twentieth century, which introduced new planning policies designed to protect rural places from urban encroachment and sprawl, seeking to preserve the unique environmental qualities of rural places. This interest led to a legacy of enduring planning interventions, such as the establishment of national parks throughout Europe, the protection of areas of outstanding natural beauty, or the planning of new ‘greenbelts’ to preserve the rural landscape around metropolitan centres throughout the global North. This often leads to an idealisation of the bucolic rural landscape as the antithesis of urban development; places to be preserved and protected, and development (such as housing) to be carefully managed or restricted to key settlements. Critically, this preservation ethos often fails to reflect shifting economic, social, environmental and demographic realities of rural areas with the protection of land resources at the expense of economic and social welfare, institutionalising some rural localities to a downwards cycle of decline through restricting development which may provide employment or housing opportunities for local people (Curry & Owen, 2009).

In contrast to the preservationist ethos above, is a developmentalist rural planning logic, identified by Tonts (2020). This approach is characteristic of resource-rich rural regions, with a focus on the exploitation of natural resources through extractive and agricultural industries, with an almost exclusive focus on the goal of economic development. This priority is translated to planning practice via ‘a suite of values oriented towards promoting the conditions for rural economic growth. This includes the protection of agricultural land, ensuring access to natural resources of extractive industries, land development, and the development of infrastructure that supports new industries’ (Tonts, 2020, p. 780). While planning interventions are designed to support economic growth, a significant outcome of this agenda has been the degradation of natural systems. In the Australian case discussed by Tonts, this includes habitat clearance for agricultural expansion and natural resource exploitation resulting in soil erosion and salinisation, biodiversity loss and species extinction. Within other contexts, these impacts might also include a decline in water quality, loss of cultural landscapes and continued carbon dependency.

While the preservationist and developmentalist perspectives both rely on strong institutions and strategic alignment, many remote or peripheral rural

regions can be characterised by weak institutions and reliance on self-help and social and family networks to underpin local development. In these cases, rural planning often evolves as a *laissez-faire* regime (see, for example, Gallent et al., 2003) whereby development is unregulated or facilitated to support family traditions or perceived local priorities. In these cases, rural planning is characterised by informal regulatory arrangements and actual contraventions of planning law; the family is prioritised over the state in welfare provision and housing production and the state is an ineffective regulator of housing produced, and private interests are emphasised (Gkartzios & Norris, 2011). Gallent et al. (2003) identify rural places in Southern Europe as fitting with this approach; however, these characteristics are also similar to Murdoch et al.'s (2003) so-called clientelist countryside identified in parts of the UK, and planning governance in rural Ireland (Gkartzios & Scott, 2014). While this approach is more likely to favour economic development rather than environmental protection, the literature suggests that development is also shaped by the priorities of local elites, and a lack of transparency in decision-making erodes local trust (Fox-Rogers, 2019).

Finally, neoliberalised rural planning logics have increasingly prevailed and tend to overlap with the three previous logics identified depending on spatial context. Over the last decade or more, the spatial planning literature has witnessed widespread accounts of the application of neoliberal ideas – the shifting relationship between the state and market – to understanding both spatial governance *processes* and development *outcomes*. This shifting balance has been characterised as both ‘roll-back’ and ‘roll-out’ neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002), combining both a commitment to extending markets while also deploying state power in the pursuit of market interests. Allmendinger (2016, p. 1), in a detailed critique of the neoliberalisation of planning, argues that planning has ‘shifted incrementally but perceptively away from an area of public policy that was an arena where [development] issues could be determined in the public interest to one that legitimises state-led facilitation of growth and development by superficially involving a wide range of interests and issues’, and that planners are themselves directly complicit in these shifts and changes. In this way, planning has increasingly moved towards acting as a facilitator of market-led development aided by a ‘delivery state’ ethos (Parker et al., 2020).

Extensive studies, outlined below, demonstrate that rural planning has been both the subject of neoliberalism (specifically deregulation and privatisation tendencies) and a method of neoliberalism as planning reforms provide an enabling agenda for business-friendly policies. In this regard, rural planning policy and practice has developed a wide-ranging repertoire of neoliberal toolkits including fast-track planning legislation to deliver infrastructure across the rural landscape, notably renewable energy projects (Natarajan,

2019), the use of market-based incentives to protect rural landscapes (Daniels, 2019) or stimulate physical development (for example, housing) in remote rural regions (e.g. Gkartzios & Norris, 2011), the increased use of planning gain within development management (e.g. Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2015) to deliver local facilities within underfunded rural municipalities, an increased reliance on community actors to produce local plans as part of the statutory planning system (Parker et al., 2017), and deregulating aspects of rural planning or the introduction of ‘light touch’ regulation such as introducing rural Enterprise Zones (Baker & Parker, 2018; Defra, 2015) to reduce so-called bureaucratic ‘red-tape’. These neoliberalising tendencies have also been advanced against the backdrop of widespread austerity measures imposed after the great financial crisis of 2008, resulting in leaner budgets for municipalities and the downsizing of planning departments in rural regions along with the rationalisation of rural services (Faulkner et al., 2019; Murphy & Scott, 2014), resulting in the further entrenchment of entrepreneurial planning approaches to offset diminished resources.

These stylised examples of co-existing, and at times overlapping, rural planning logics fail to recognise and address, however, the contemporary rural condition: the diversity of rural places, the ongoing restructuring of agriculture and wider rural economies, shifting demography and new environmental imperatives that will shape rural futures. Moreover, these approaches are often underpinned by a dichotomy between economy and environment, with limited understanding of the interrelationships between economic, social and environmental processes within rural localities. For example, a preservationist approach often focuses on a narrow set of environmental goals, neglecting the economic and social health of rural communities, while the developmentalist logic represents a largely discredited and outdated economic argument whereby environmental protection is perceived as a key obstacle to development (see Kitchen & Marsden, 2009). Neoliberalising agendas favour market interests through business-friendly agendas often at the expense of local democratic decision-making or community values, framing planning as a bureaucratic barrier to development. This suggests an urgent need to reinvent rural planning for the twenty-first century. In the remaining sections, the chapter explores the potential of well-being to be mainstreamed as a rural planning outcome as a means of reinforcing the interrelationships between social, economic and ecological systems to enhance rural quality of life.

### Well-being as a policy goal

Since the early 2000s, there has been a dramatic rise in interest among researchers and policymakers in the concept of well-being, which intensified

in the wake of the financial crisis as policymakers sought new narratives that challenge the dominance of economic productivity measurements as indicators of social progress (Bache & Scott, 2018). Economists have traditionally employed the concept of ‘utility’ to measure welfare, which in traditional economic models is assumed to be an increasing function of present and future consumption of goods, leisure and amenities. Due to the difficulty of measuring utility, income was generally used as an indicator of individual and societal welfare, using personal income at an individual level, and national income – Gross National Product (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – at the macro level. It has long been recognised by economists, geographers, sociologists, psychologists and others, however, that macro-measures of national income are inadequate measures of the performance of an economy and wider society (e.g. Erikson, 1993; United Nations, 1954) and have only a partial relationship with societal well-being. Such a singular approach can have its limitations in that economic progress does not necessarily ensure the provision of other factors that might be considered to be important for quality of life – for example, shared community values. Indeed, there could possibly be an inverse relationship between economic development and some factors such as personal security or a clean environment. Challenging narrow economic measurements has been advocated by expert governmental commissioned panels. For example, in the report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, commissioned by then president of France, Nicholas Sarkozy, the authors state that ‘a ... unifying theme of the report ... is that the time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being’ (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Reporting in 2009, this Commission identified eight components of well-being: material living standards; health; education; personal activities including work; political voice and governance; social connections and relationships; environment; and security (both economic and physical).

Just as monetary measures of macro performance are inadequate measures of performance, individual and household income is an inadequate measure of individual well-being, fuelling a growing interest in quality of life measures. The quality of life concept has three principal characteristics (Shucksmith et al., 2009): it focuses on an individual’s perceptions of their life situations rather than a nation’s quality of life; it is multidimensional, covering multiple life domains and their interplay; and it brings together objective information on living conditions with subjective views and attitudes to provide a picture of overall well-being in society. Since the late 2000s, extensive studies of quality of life and a new ‘happiness’ literature has emerged employing data from surveys as empirical approximations of individual well-being (e.g. Layard, 2010; Moro et al., 2008; Oswald & Wu, 2010). Primarily associated with the work of psychologists and economists,

studies of individual well-being increasingly measure subjective well-being, concerning people's self-reported assessment of their own well-being. As outlined by Tinkler and Hicks (2011), survey questions of this nature aim to capture an individual's well-being by measuring how people think and feel, for example by asking about their life satisfaction, happiness and psychological well-being. What makes the questions subjective is that the questions ask respondents to rate their feelings rather than recall factual information, enabling respondents to assess quality of life in their own terms. This approach is in contrast to the more traditional approach which uses objective indicators such as level of educational attainment, health and employment to determine well-being (Office for National Statistics, 2010).

However, the growing emphasis on measuring subjective well-being has not been without criticism. For example, Brereton et al. (2011) highlight the complex relationships between objective and subjective indicators of quality of life. This theme is elaborated further by Austin (2018) in relation to the 2008/09 economic crisis in the UK. Austin identifies the material impacts of the economic crisis, illustrating negative consequences for employment, income, education and health outcomes. However, Austin also observes that over this post-crash period, measures of subjective well-being remained largely unchanged, with similar levels of individual self-reported life satisfaction scores pre- and post-crisis being reported, with no significant variation at the population level or within income groups. This is explained as potentially relating to a downsizing of expectations across the population in the wake of the crisis.

Similar issues of 'adjusting expectations' were observed in a series of Irish surveys on life satisfaction undertaken in 2001, 2007 and 2012 (the latter two, author-led) (see Brereton et al., 2011; Murphy & Scott, 2014), which proved to be particularly important in the context of the dispersed nature of the rural settlement system and subjective well-being. Applying a similar methodology, these surveys illustrate little variation in life satisfaction among the rural population during the so-called Celtic Tiger boom and following the 2008/09 economic crash, despite a severe contraction of the rural economy, rising levels of unemployment and emigration and widespread negative equity and mortgage stress as the Irish crisis centred on a bursting of its housing bubble (a consequence of the oversupply of housing in rural areas through weak planning regulation). Moreover, the 2001 and 2007 surveys also compared life satisfaction across rural and urban areas, reporting higher life satisfaction scores among rural households than their urban counterparts. As Brereton et al. (2011) observed, this related to lower expectations within rural communities with regard to service provision (particularly health services) and a greater reliance on family networks for welfare support to mitigate limited access to services.



**Figure 7.1** Dispersed rural housing in County Clare, west of Ireland.

A key issue raised in the Irish case relates to rural settlement patterns and potential trade-offs between individual self-reported well-being and wider sustainability measures. The traditional settlement pattern in rural Ireland reflects a longstanding cultural preference for a house in the open countryside (Figure 7.1) rather than within villages or small towns. Single detached ('one-off') houses in the open countryside comprise approximately 70 per cent of rural dwellings, with the remainder of dwellings located in rural clusters, villages or small rural towns (Keaveney, 2007). These 'one-off' houses totalled 442,699 rural dwelling units or 26 per cent of Ireland's housing stock in 2016. Survey results show that rural respondents living in the open countryside are more satisfied with their lives than those living in villages and small towns (and larger settlements as well), with respondents citing the peace and quiet of rural living as the most highly valued aspect of their housing preferences, which compensates for limited access to services (Brereton et al., 2011). Furthermore, the availability of a 'bigger and cheaper house' in the open countryside was viewed as a key benefit to rural living, with rural dwellers prepared to endure longer commutes to work and fewer local facilities in exchange for a large, affordable rural property. Later work, by Scott et al. (2017), additionally concluded that the preference for living in the open countryside in Ireland was closely related to the presence of family networks in a locality, reinforcing the importance of social capital (rather than services or state welfare) as a key household support.

From a planning perspective, these preferences and high levels of self-reported individual life satisfaction raise challenges for rural sustainability. For example, dispersed rural living is largely car dependent, poses potential risks to groundwater quality (through reliance on individual sewerage systems and septic tanks) and negatively impacts on rural landscapes. And while rural residents may express high life satisfaction scores, it may mask the experiences of those unable to access rural housing, for example, through displacement caused by new affluent incomers. Moreover, a continuation of dispersed settlement patterns has implications in the context of an ageing rural society (for example, accessing health services or social care at home) and poses potential barriers in relation to transitioning to a low-carbon society through locked-in car dependency. This example, therefore, illustrates the deficiency of focusing on measuring individual well-being in relation to spatial planning outcomes – it captures private benefits without assessing potential costs and is limited in assessing sustainable well-being for future generations in relation to the erosion of essential natural systems.

The deficits of conventional economic indicators and the limitations of an individual life satisfaction approach has prompted interest in broader place-based measures of development success, with well-being implying a positive relationship between people and places and therefore a necessary emphasis on environmental or natural capital (Carlisle et al., 2009; Drescher, 2014). New Zealand, for example, has developed a novel *Living Standards Framework* (The Treasury, 2018) comprising measures of current well-being along with indicators of future well-being (focused on natural capital, social capital, human capital and financial capital) to provide a dynamic measurement tool. These indicators are captured on the New Zealand Treasury's Living Standards Dashboard to provide a 'real-time' platform for capturing social progress beyond narrow economic competitiveness indicators.

### Spatial planning and well-being outcomes

Influenced by these wider policy debates and also the mainstreaming of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Habitat III goals, spatial planners are increasingly exploring well-being as a key outcome of planning practice (Shekhar et al., 2019). This has led to a growing interest in evaluating well-being and its broad domains as an outcome of spatial plans and planning decision-making. For example, a recent European Spatial Observatory Network (ESPON) -sponsored report, *Quality of Life Measurements and Methodology* (Sessa et al., 2020), attempts to develop a territorial framework for measuring quality of life applied to spatial contexts, with potential application for monitoring the outcomes of spatial

plans and as an evaluative tool to assess the potential territorial impacts of sectoral policies.

In relation to its conceptual model, the report draws on Amartya Sen's (1992) capabilities model to move beyond a simple focus on distribution of territorial 'goods' to examine how those distributions affect well-being and how we 'function'. The emphasis, instead, is on 'capabilities' – on individual agency, functioning and well-being – to examine what environmental or territorial 'goods' do for us rather than simply focusing on their distribution (Schlosberg, 2007). Thus, territorial quality of life is defined as 'the capability of living beings to survive and flourish in a place, thanks to the economic, social and ecological conditions that support life in that place' (Sessa et al., 2020, p. 9). The model comprises three spheres – personal, socio-economic and ecological – and three quality of life dimensions – 'Good Life' enablers, life survival ('maintenance') and life flourishing, with these latter two dimensions representing territorial quality of life outcomes. To further elaborate on these outcome indicators, the report's authors espouse a deliberative approach to engage citizens, experts and policymakers in co-deciding what, why and how territorial quality of life should be measured, emphasising a citizen-centric and place-specific approach. In other words, developing measures of well-being should be bottom-up, citizen engaged and place sensitive. Furthermore, the report recommends that territorial quality of life dashboards should be developed and utilised to provide real-time monitoring of outcomes as part of a territorial quality of life accounting process.

A further example of measuring quality of life derived from spatial planning interventions is the UK Royal Town Planning Institute's recently published *Measuring What Matters* report and toolkit (Kevin Murray Associates et al., 2020) as an evaluative framework and methodology. The framework is based on assessing outcomes across eight key domains: (1) place – design and people; (2) health and well-being; (3) environment – conservation and improvement; (4) climate change; (5) homes and communities; (6) economy and town centres; (7) movement; and (8) process and engagement. While these domains appear equally applicable across different spatial contexts – urban, suburban, rural – the elaboration of these domains into practice examples reveals a bias towards or emphasis on shaping urban places, such as urban design interventions to support physical well-being or the virtues of a '15-minute neighbourhood' ideal, which lacks transferability to more dispersed rural settlement systems.

In addition to an urban emphasis, a further limitation of toolkits along these lines is their focus on measuring specific quality of life indicators but with a more limited understanding of the complex interrelationships between these different domains or the specific ways (cause and effect) that interventions lead to well-being outcomes. Thus, the focus is on



measurement and monitoring of specific outcomes; however, there is a deficit in understanding how spatial planning interventions or decision-making can enhance or erode well-being and quality of life. In what ways can spatial planning be an enabling factor in enhancing rural well-being or enhance societal well-being inclusive of rural places?

To address these deficits, Gkartzios et al. (2022) developed a ‘capitals framework’ as a means of assessing the role of spatial planning in contributing to enhancing well-being in rural places, adapted in Table 7.1 to emphasise quality of life outcomes. Focusing on domains relevant to spatial planning (rather than broad-brush rural policy), we identify four fundamental domains or capitals: (1) built capital, (2) economic capital, (3) land-based capital and (4) social-cultural capital, with each capital comprising key rural assets, resources or infrastructures. Illustrative examples include:

- **Built Capital:** economic infrastructures (e.g. workspace, retail facilities); nature-based infrastructures critical to settlement systems; social-cultural infrastructures (e.g. housing, community facilities)
- **Economic capital:** physical productive infrastructures (e.g. land assets); entrepreneurial infrastructure (e.g. business links, value chains); community wealth-building capacity
- **Land-based capital:** land as a socially productive asset; landscape (e.g. tangible and intangible heritage); nature-based infrastructures (e.g. natural processes, ecosystem services)
- **Social-cultural capital:** social networks; community capacity and active citizenship; inclusive places; creativity and cultural practices

The framework is based on a Bourdieu-inspired understanding of different forms of capital and their interrelationships. So while Bourdieu (1986) refers to economic capital as material assets that are ‘immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242), key to Bourdieu’s analysis was his observation that other forms of capital (social and cultural) can be convertible to economic capital through enabling processes, such as education or social obligations or connections. Moreover, economic capital afforded opportunities for developing or acquiring further stocks of social and cultural capital, providing a positive feedback loop, suggesting that the complex interplay of economic, social and cultural capital could be mutually reinforcing. Understanding this complex interplay between different forms of capital is critical in understanding development and well-being outcomes across rural space. Moreover, Gkartzios et al. (2022) argue that spatial planning has the potential to play a critical role as a *conversion factor* through a reappraisal of the rural resource base, through creating mutually reinforcing relationships between the various forms of capital, and ensuring stocks of capital are reinvested.

Assets/Capitals	Conversion/enabling factors	Actions	Impact	Outcomes
<p><b>Built Capital:</b> Economic infrastructures (e.g. workspace); nature-based infrastructures critical to settlement systems; social-cultural infrastructures (e.g. housing, community facilities)</p> <p><b>Economic capital:</b> Physical productive infrastructures (e.g. land assets); entrepreneurial infrastructure (e.g. business links, value chains); community wealth-building capacity</p> <p><b>Land-based capital:</b> Land as a socially productive asset; landscape (e.g. tangible and intangible heritage); nature-based infrastructures (e.g. natural processes, ecosystem services)</p> <p><b>Social-cultural capital:</b> Social networks; community capacity and active citizenship; inclusive places; creativity and cultural practices</p>	<p><i>Spatial planning as an enabling factor, comprising:</i></p> <p><b>Regulatory environment</b></p> <p><b>Institutional capacity</b></p> <p><b>Collaboration and problem-solving</b></p> <p><b>Adaptative capacity</b></p> <p><b>Innovation and creativity</b></p> <p><b>Ability to mobilise external resources</b></p> <p><b>Ability to foster urban-rural relationships</b></p> <p><b>De-lock unsustainable development paths to new path creation</b></p>	<p>Actions that enhance and reinvest</p> <p>➔</p>	<p><i>Strengthening, mutually reinforcing interrelationships ...</i></p> <p>Built capital</p> <p>Economic capital</p> <p>Land-based capital</p> <p>Social-cultural capital</p>	<p><b>A Countryside of Wellbeing</b></p> <p>The just countryside</p> <p>The prosperous countryside</p> <p>The healthy countryside</p> <p>A resilient and smart countryside</p>
		<p>Actions that deplete and erode</p> <p>➔</p>	<p><i>Eroding of capitals or antagonistic relationships</i></p> <p>Built capital</p> <p>Economic capital</p> <p>Land-based capital</p> <p>Social-cultural capital</p>	<p><b>A Countryside of Discord</b></p> <p>Social exclusion</p> <p>Wealth extraction, resource hoarding and economic vulnerability</p> <p>Diminished quality of life outcomes</p> <p>Natural system breakdown</p>
<p>Reinvesting, reappraising and mobilising</p> <p>↑</p>				

**Table 7.1** A capitals framework for planning for a Countryside of Wellbeing (adapted from Gkartziou, Gallent and Scott, 2022).

Therefore, rather than focusing on measuring outcomes of well-being through an indicators-based approach, a capital framework provides a means for focusing on rural and community resources and assets, and evaluating the processes for mobilising those resources that have the potential to enhance or erode pathways to rural well-being. As outlined in [Table 7.1](#), spatial planning potentially performs a critical role in relation to, inter alia, an area's capacity to act, fostering collaboration and enhancing urban-rural relations.

If we revisit the four alternative rural planning logics considered at the beginning of this chapter – preservationist, developmentalist, laissez-faire and neoliberalised rural planning – the capitals framework for rural well-being illustrates the limitations of each approach. These four logics all lead to depleted resources or take approaches whereby planning interventions fail to reinvest or convert capital into other forms of capital, leading to contested development outcomes (a 'countryside of discord'). For example, preservationist agendas tend to protect rural landscapes, but create exclusive places to live, undermining bridge-building social capital. Developmentalist agendas, as previously highlighted, are based on the extraction and depletion of natural capital, with consequences for potential flows of benefits from natural ecosystems, critical to well-being and a healthy planet. It emphasises wealth extraction, adding little to wealth creation among rural communities. The laissez-faire approach often favours the interests of dominant local elites, again eroding social capital through declining trust in local political institutions. Through deepening the ideology of the market, neoliberal agendas can undermine the capacity of local institutions to act, shrinking public services while favouring business interests rather than wider community wealth building or investing in social infrastructure.

An alternative is to plan for a *countryside of well-being*, focused on converting rural assets or capitals towards just outcomes, community wealth-building and prosperity, healthy and inclusive places and smart and resilient communities. Planning for rural places should be built on a clear understanding of the interdependencies between economic, social, cultural and environmental processes within rural localities. This suggests the need to consider the economic and social health of rural communities as important elements of sustainability alongside environmental aspects (Owen, 1996; Saxby et al., 2018) and for spatial plans to create mutually reinforcing relationships between environment and economy to bridge this limiting divide (Kitchen & Marsden, 2006). Adopting a capitals framework provides a means of thinking about, and reflecting upon, the elements that come together to make rural places.

## Conclusion

Rural communities have too often been neglected or marginalised within planning theory and practice, with rural places framed in environmental (protection) or economic (extraction) terms. This chapter argues that the mainstreaming of well-being as a spatial planning goal has the potential to develop socially progressive rural planning policies, anchored in ‘place’ to emphasise the interconnectedness of various well-being domains. While subjective well-being measures provide a useful counterpoint to more traditional economic measures of ‘progress’, the chapter suggests the need for a broader place-sensitive perspective that takes into account a holistic range of rural ‘capitals’. Drawing on Gkartzios et al. (2022), this provides a framework for understanding the interrelationships, the potential for ‘conversion’ of one form of capital to other capitals, for intergenerational sustainability and well-being, and also how planning can play an enabling role in this process. Rather than provide a checklist of indicators focused on spatial planning outcomes, a more empowering process is to explore how rural communities themselves can mobilise place-based capitals to shape future development trajectories and well-being outcomes. This should be a matter for public deliberation and debate (and not expert prescription) (Shucksmith, 2018), with rural communities themselves best placed to identify priorities or to ‘work through’ their own visions of rural well-being.

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## Rural placemaking for sustained community well-being

*Anne Tietjen and Gertrud Jørgensen*

### Introduction

In Denmark, as in many countries, rural areas face the challenges of a decreasing and ageing population, lack of access to public and private services, decay of the built environment and below-average socio-economic development. Balanced urban–rural development is a major societal concern, and place-based, participatory local projects are increasingly at the forefront of political measures to address it. Such projects are partly publicly funded, for example by Leader or national funds for area renewal, but they are increasingly also funded by private charities. To sustain and enhance their community well-being, rural dwellers collectively initiate and implement projects in the built environment through such funding.

This chapter investigates projects for buildings, open spaces and landscapes in villages, small rural towns and the open countryside which are (co-)created by local people and seek better quality of life and community well-being. The projects reveal what rural dwellers deem valuable for their (individual and) collective well-being and future welfare, insofar as they devote considerable resources to designing the projects, applying for funding, carrying out the construction and securing the projects' management and use post-completion.

Using thirteen Danish cases, we examine the physical interventions rural dwellers undertake to preserve, transform and develop their built environment, and how these interventions change the possibilities of rural life. Specifically, we ask what types of common spaces people consider valuable for their (individual and) community well-being, and what interventions they therefore pursue in placemaking. We are also interested in what such built interventions *do*: how they change relationships between people, places and things, how they affect possibilities for rural life and how they stimulate new perceptions of place and new ideas for future development.

### Placemaking as an expression of community well-being

*Placemaking* refers to the process of people collectively making, shaping, remaking and maintaining what we would classically understand as *places*: specific spaces that provide services or functions for the community, but which also create or sustain local meaning, identity and community (Cresswell, 2004; Gordon, 2012). Places should be understood from an insider perspective (Friedmann, 2010) as lived-in spaces where ‘people live and work, converse with others, are alone, rest, learn, are active or still’ (Canter, 1977, p. 1). A place in this sense need not be unique. A place is a place ‘because it is yours. It is intimate and known, cared for and argued about’ (Schneekloth & Shibley, 2000, p. 132). While psychology often understands place attachment as an aspect of individual identity (e.g. Giuliani, 2003), planning and design give it a collective meaning, understanding places as assemblages of many – sometimes conflicting – individual representations (Cresswell, 2004; Relph, 1976). Place is more than a static container or material backdrop against which social interactions occur; it is inherently relational in both its production and its influence (Cresswell, 2004) and physical spaces co-produce social life as ‘the structure of the material world pushes back on people’ (Yaneva, 2009, p. 277).

The concept of placemaking is understood differently by different disciplines, from cultural workers to architects (Ellery et al., 2021). For the purpose of this chapter, we tentatively define it as ‘small-scale, citizen-informed ... projects designed to improve, enliven and redefine the spaces of the city’ (Sweeney et al., 2018) – or in our case, the spaces of the village, small town or local landscape. In practice and research, placemaking is often linked to urban redevelopment. Although rural placemaking is less well researched, Lee and Blackford (2020) consider placemaking an important framework for individual and collective identity and well-being in rural areas.

Well-being can be measured individually as ‘a contented state of being happy, healthy or prosperous’ (Forjaz et al., 2011, p. 784), and indicators are conceived with the intent of comparing levels of happiness (Helliwell et al., 2021). But we work with the concept of community well-being as the ‘broad range of social, environmental, cultural and governance goals and priorities identified as of greatest importance by a particular community, population group or society’ (Cox et al., 2010, p. 72). Well-being is not only about the individual’s good life in a practical and material sense, but also about *living* the good life in relationship with others; it is thus ‘grounded in a broader, shared understanding of how the world is and should be’ White (2010, p. 160). Similarly, McCrea et al. (2014, 2016) underscore the importance of *agency* in well-being: the ability to collectively create and



shape life as a means of community resilience, sustaining good local community under the pressure of changing circumstances. Well-being ‘can have no form, expression or enhancement without consideration of place’ (Atkinson et al., 2012, p. 3) – and, we would add, the process of placemaking and collectively shaping physical spaces is connected to agency in the creation and sustenance of community well-being.

This chapter considers placemaking as a situated, collective approach to the enhancement and maintenance of community well-being through physical projects that create, change or restructure shared built environments and landscapes and thereby affect (the possibilities of) rural life. To this end, we work with a situated, relational and temporal understanding of rural spaces and well-being (Atkinson, 2013; Winterton et al., 2014), and we view local spatial projects as complex assemblages of people, places and things that have been established to protect and enhance individual and collective quality of life and well-being (Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016, 2018). We therefore also acknowledge relationships among localities and between insiders and outsiders as both users and funding bodies (cf. Winterton et al., 2014).

### **Rural development and placemaking projects in Denmark**

Denmark is a small welfare country with a population of 5.8 million, between 20 and 30 per cent of whom (depending on the definitions used) live in rural areas where intensive agriculture dominates the landscape’s spatial character (Statistics Denmark, 2019; European Commission, 2020). As in many countries, Denmark’s spatial development is characterised by a ‘double urbanisation process’ (Eliassen et al., 2020; Bogason, 2020) polarised between cities and rural areas: while population and economic growth are generally concentrated in larger cities and metropolitan areas, the population in rural peripheral areas is also increasingly concentrated in local centres of 1,000 inhabitants or more (Statistics Denmark, 2019; Regeringen, 2020).

This leaves peripheral rural areas – i.e. very small towns, villages and the open countryside more than half an hour’s drive from one of the eleven largest cities – facing multiple challenges. Although unemployment differs between different rural areas, they all generally suffer from other socio-economic problems: a shrinking population (as young people move away), below-average socio-economic development, large numbers of empty or difficult-to-sell houses and declining levels of public and private services (Regeringen, 2019, 2020).

In line with the ‘new rural paradigm’ (OECD, 2006), national rural development policies increasingly aim for improved quality of life and broad sustainable development goals (e.g. Regeringen, 2020), marking a shift from general welfare distribution and agricultural support towards place-based, participatory local projects. This shift coincided with a structural reform in 2007 whereby 273 municipalities were merged into 98 relatively large, strong entities. Services were centralised, especially in rural areas, and there was increased emphasis on the development of attractive rural living environments based on existing qualities, resources and potentials. A multitude of place-based, participatory spatial projects to enhance rural quality of life have subsequently been conducted, initiated by local communities, often in cooperation with municipal administrations (Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016, 2018, 2019).

This has been possible thanks to not only municipal reform but also a strong charitable sector. In Denmark, charity funding for good causes amounts to approximately DKK 8 billion (more than EUR 1 billion) annually. Charities are increasingly professional and strategic, proactively setting agendas they consider beneficial to society (Kristiansen, 2019). Some charities focus on improving quality of life through the built environment or direct their programmes towards challenges in rural areas. This makes it possible for communities in such areas to attract funding to change their built environment and thereby support community well-being.

Using information from the five most relevant funding bodies (private, semi-private and public), we identified 734 built interventions funded during 2010–2016 in peripheral rural areas (new or transformed buildings, open spaces, landscape projects) that were initiated, co-designed or operated by the local community and were open to the public or directed towards a larger community. Of these projects, 104 had estimated construction costs of more than DKK 1 million each (EUR 130,000).

Many of the smaller projects were shelters for nature-based recreation or open public spaces for multiple activities, mainly sports. This was probably partly because two large funding bodies had special programmes for such small-scale projects. Among the 104 larger projects, multipurpose cultural centres prevailed. These constitute something more than typical community centres, providing meeting places not only for locals but also for larger communities with shared interests and activities. Visitor attractions, mainly for non-locals or tourists, and outdoor public spaces were also frequent; their uses included meeting places, cultural activities, sports, business and education. The larger projects also included several new or transformed walking or cycling routes, creating new spatial connections within local communities or with the landscape.

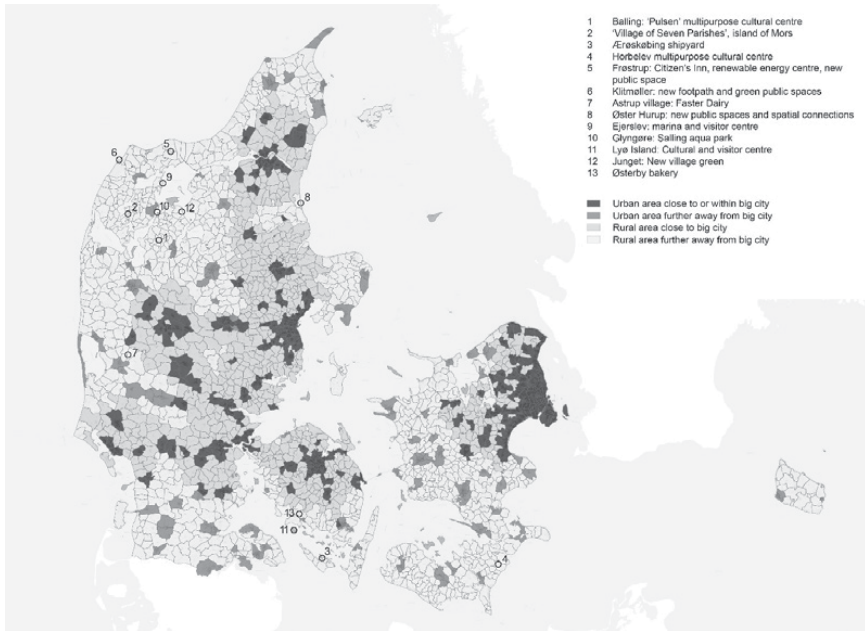


Figure 8.1 Overview map of cases in Denmark.

From the 104 projects, we selected 13 qualitative case studies (Figure 8.1, Table 8.1). They represent a variety of locations, intervention types and forms of project organisation. All are projects where larger or smaller interventions have renewed or transformed existing buildings, open spaces or landscapes. Structural interventions include conversions, renovations, extensions and new builds, and also the demolition or partial dismantling of existing buildings. All thirteen projects have been completed, a criterion we chose because we wanted to know how the projects affected the community's built environment and life. We studied the processes, outcomes and transformative effects, including physical changes, new activities, new spatial uses, perceptions of place, and how these had sparked ideas for future place development. We took a qualitative mixed-method approach including spatial and functional analysis, document studies, site visits and interviews with key actors.

Our starting point was that these charity-based projects could reveal what people strive for as placemaking for community well-being in peripheral rural areas. We see these interventions in the built environment as (attempts at) creating place-based solutions to local challenges, not forgetting that they are also influenced by the funders' agendas.

Table 8.1 Overview of cases

No.	Case	Main idea	Changes to built environment	Owners	Use and users	Community well-being perspectives
1	<b>Balling: ‘Pulsen’ multipurpose cultural centre.</b> Transformation, new construction, 2014, DKK 69 million.	Transform local sports hall into community centre for several villages.	Sports hall rebuilt, new constructions added.	Non-profit local organisation.	Sports, wellness, cafe, healthcare, meetings, fetes.	Services and meeting place. Many people do voluntary work, enhancing local networks and social life.
2	<b>‘Village of Seven Parishes’, island of Mors: village cooperation.</b> Transformation, demolition, new construction, public space, landscape project, 2015, DKK 17 million.	Formation of village cluster where services and meeting places are differentiated by function (sports, culture, nature) and shared among seven parishes.	Private school in new building, three community houses in former schools, houses demolished to form new public space, landscape path binding the villages together.	Umbrella organisation coordinates subprojects owned by local associations.	School, meetings, sports, theatre, nature education, playground, park, billiards, brewery, birthday parties etc.	Sustaining social life and new relationships between villages. ‘Houses are easily sold, there are jobs, a school, a nursery and a grocer’s shop, depopulation halted’ (project website).

(continued)

Table 8.1 (Cont.)

No.	Case	Main idea	Changes to built environment	Owners	Use and users	Community well-being perspectives
3	<b>Ærøskøbing shipyard.</b> Renovation, transformation, new construction, public space, 2012, DKK 25.5 million.	Redevelop underused shipyard into visitor centre, educational facility for youth with special needs.	Renovation of shipyard, creating room for shop and offices. Educational facility in new building.	Buildings owned by the public. Activities are private social entrepreneurship.	DIY ship repair. Education for people with special needs. Visitor centre for tourists.	Point of interest in the town. Preservation of living heritage. Education for disabled youth benefits the whole island.
4	<b>Horbelev multipurpose cultural centre.</b> Transformation, new construction, 2016, DKK 12.5 million.	Transform closed school into new meeting place for several villages on North Falster.	Dispersed buildings of former school renovated, new connecting building added to integrate buildings and serve as common space.	Non-profit, local organisation initiated, implemented, owns and runs the centre.	Sports, concerts, public talks, local fetes, small private businesses, second-hand shop. Users pay rent.	Sustaining social life. New and redirected networks, broader than just the village. New architectural landmark as point of identity.

5	<p><b>Frøstrup: Citizens' Inn, renewable energy centre, new public space.</b></p> <p>Renovation, transformation, demolition, public space, 2015, DKK 6 million.</p>	<p>Revival of old inn as multipurpose cultural centre. Renewable energy exhibition centre, new public spaces.</p>	<p>Inn renovated with bar, meeting space and ballroom. Fodder storage turned into exhibition hall. Houses demolished to form new public spaces connecting vital functions in the village.</p>	<p>Initiated, owned and operated by citizens' association.</p>	<p>Friday bar, meeting rooms, citizens' library, concerts, summer fetes.</p>	<p>Sustaining social life and community-building. 'Houses are now sold and plots are hard to get, two food stores. The school avoided closure, and there is a rich sports scene' (project website).</p>
6	<p><b>Klitmøller: new footpath and green public spaces.</b></p> <p>New construction, landscape project, 2020, DKK 4.8 million.</p>	<p>Connect the village's main public spaces for pedestrians and create public access to the Klitmøller Stream.</p>	<p>New footpath along the Klitmøller Stream connecting village centre with school. New green spaces and pedestrian bridges across river.</p>	<p>Initiated, built and owned by municipality in cooperation with local community.</p>	<p>Schoolchildren, locals and tourists, walkers/cyclists.</p>	<p>New school path is essential for traffic safety. New bridges connect two parts of the town. Better access to nature. Supports identity and history.</p>

(continued)

Table 8.1 (Cont.)

No.	Case	Main idea	Changes to built environment	Owners	Use and users	Community well-being perspectives
7	<b>Astrup village: Faster Dairy.</b> Transformation, renovation, demolition, public space, 2015, DKK 4.8 million.	Reuse large derelict dairy for private business, shop and new public space.	Inside and outside renovation, a large building removed, new public space created in front of building.	Owned by citizens' association, run on commercial terms.	Supermarket, space for start-ups, exhibition space, petrol station. Regional use.	Provides private services and creates workspaces. Refers to industrial past and creates pride and identity.
8	<b>Øster Hurup: new public space and spatial connections.</b> New construction, public space, landscape project, 2018, DKK 4.6 million.	Establish new central public space and better connections between town centre, harbour and beach.	New square with lookout tower forms end point of new promenade between town and harbour. Road redirected. New parking, boardwalk through wetland.	Municipality implemented and now owns project. Long co-creation process. Use is organised by local citizens.	Common activities for locals and tourists. Crabbing, morning coffee, concerts, singing.	Town structure 'turned around' to accentuate connection to sea. New spaces used for public events. Better access to nature. Supports identity and history.

9	<b>Ejerslev: marina and visitor centre.</b> Transformation, new construction, landscape project, 2015, DKK 3.4 million.	Former diatomic soil shipping harbour transformed into marina, public access by footpath to former quarries.	Repair of harbour, turning it into marina with new service buildings. New restaurant. New public footpath in quarries.	Municipality owns harbour and public part of quarry. Users run marina. Restaurant is leased.	Sailors (local and incoming). Popular destination for lunch or walks. Small museum.	Derelict place opened and used by many regional locals and tourists. Better access to nature. Supports identity and history.
10	<b>Glyngøre: Salling aqua park.</b> New construction, 2013, DKK 3 million.	Sea diving facilities for amateurs in the region, creating a new underwater park.	Two shipwrecks, tank, artificial grotto, two artificial stone reefs placed near Glyngøre harbour at depths up to 24 metres.	Initiated, planned, built and operated by local sea diving club. Municipality owns harbour.	Use is free. Divers come from near and far.	Good for divers, but some conflict with other harbour users. Plan for whole area is underway. Facility helps local biodiversity.
11	<b>Lyø Island: cultural and visitor centre.</b> Transformation, 2015, DKK 2.4 million.	Transform closed school into restaurant and visitors'/cultural centre for locals and tourists.	School building transformed into summer cafe, meeting rooms, small museum, open picnic room.	Citizens' association initiated, owns and operates it. Running of cafe is leased.	Many tourists visit cafe in summer. Restaurant seems to be most active.	Instead of empty school building, cultural and visitors' centre forms lively node in the middle of Lyø.

(continued)



Table 8.1 (Cont.)

No.	Case	Main idea	Changes to built environment	Owners	Use and users	Community well-being perspectives
12	<b>Junget: new village green.</b> Demolition, new construction, public space, 2017, DKK 1.6 million.	Create a new meeting place to enhance quality of life and community feeling in a challenged village.	Village green created on empty plots after demolition of houses on high street, with functional artworks built with bricks from the houses.	Initiated by local residents' association and artists. Managed by local residents on voluntary basis.	Resting place for tourists. Used for barbecues and meetings for local people.	Sustained social life. The reuse of bricks from demolished houses in this central public space is a reminder of history and creates place identity.
13	<b>Østerby Bakery Museum.</b> Renovation, 2016, DKK 0.8 million.	A group of people wished to renovate former bakery and turn it into a museum.	House renovated; funding secured for roof renovation.	Private owner. Local association supports museum activities.	Museum open by appointment. Visited by schoolchildren and tourists.	Place identity, awareness of history.

### **What rural people do to improve community well-being through placemaking and changes in the built environment**

The thirteen projects we examined were motivated by challenges ranging from population decline and waning public services (especially school closures) to empty or underused buildings and building decay. They were initiated because the built environment – or important specific buildings – were experienced as outdated, inadequate and unattractive. The built environment is seen both as a symptom and a cause of crises; hence, creating attractive built environments where meetings, joint activities or services can occur is seen as helping to solve such problems. Another, albeit less acknowledged, issue is the lack of access to landscapes and nature – or to put it more positively, the desire for better access to the landscape and better opportunities to experience nature, which was the goal of several projects.

In general, the projects rethink space to develop new meeting places and activity spaces for contemporary rural life that are open to a wider public or used by a larger community. They are created and/or operated by residents; they transform existing built structures; they are based on sites' existing qualities, resources and potentials, such as architecture, cultural heritage or natural features; they create new relationships and actor networks across multiple scales, for example by reaching out to users from beyond the local area, including tourists. Across these characteristics, we found four strategies for building community well-being and broader quality of life through new public spaces.

#### *Strategy 1: New common spaces for new communities of interest*

Population decline means there are fewer people to participate in the local community, initiate and foster activities, or create social life. Simultaneously, there is a concentration of people in the somewhat larger villages with better levels of service, as well as in some particularly attractive villages. The first strategy we found transforms existing built spaces (indoors and outdoors) for activities or public functions that reach out beyond the local community: to neighbouring villages, the regional area, or tourists. This strategy encompasses multipurpose cultural centres or new types of public spaces, often created through the transformation of existing buildings or public space.

Almost all cases pertain to this strategy, but we found two different models for new meeting spaces. Model 1, which is mostly used in small towns or larger villages, concentrates many different activities (sports, culture, community centre etc.) under one roof (or in one place). In addition to local users, this model attracts external users, including tourists in some

cases (1, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 12). By contrast, model 2 differentiates and distributes activities across multiple locations within a larger geographical area (mainly case 2, although case 12 is also part of a larger village cluster in the region). Both models aim to concentrate users in selected locations and thus to create the basis for the maintenance, strengthening and development of local activities, informal and formal meetings and social life. Both models create new communities by providing a material framework for them.

In Balling (case 1), local project organisers successfully expanded the village sports hall into a professionally managed sports and community centre for the rural part of the Salling region, with many new users and a wide variety of activities. In addition to sports, there is wellness, physiotherapy, a lecture hall and ballroom, meeting rooms, a cafe and, most importantly, a new medical centre (Figure 8.2, bottom right). In Frøstrup (case 5), the renovated inn became more of a local meeting place, a community and cultural centre for villagers and wider local residents, managed by the local civic association (Figure 8.2, top left). The inn's remodelling strengthened existing activities and enabled new ones, such as concerts and other cultural events in the ballroom. With Horbelev's multipurpose cultural centre



**Figure 8.2** New common spaces for new communities. Clockwise from the top left: Frøstrup Citizen's Inn, Horbelev multipurpose cultural centre; interior view of the multipurpose cultural centre 'Pulsen' in Balling; the new centre for nature-based activities in the former school in Karby, Village of Seven Parishes.

(case 4), an elliptical extension to the former school buildings included a spacious atrium to connect the previously separate buildings into one complex (Figure 8.2, top right). According to key actors, it ‘should be the centre of all the villages in north-east Falster – but it was difficult’. Three years since its opening, the centre mainly attracts a local audience to events such as concerts organised by the residents’ association. On the island of Mors, nine villages have clustered as the ‘Village of Seven Parishes’ (case 2) – an example of model 2. In collaboration with the municipality, residents have redistributed their facilities for sports, nature-based activities, cultural activities and community centres among the nine villages, redesigning them for common use in the village cluster (Figure 8.2, bottom left). Key actors in the project and selected residents indicate that the new shared facilities are well received and that people from all nine villages use the new meeting places.

According to key actors, all these projects have strengthened the local community, increased identifications with place and had a positive effect on external perceptions, helping to put the places ‘on the map’. In Frøstrup (case 5) and the Village of Seven Parishes (case 2), key actors indicate that the number of families with children is increasing. The projects, they say, have created new social relationships beyond one’s own village: relationships among the new facilities’ users, collaborative relationships between project makers and operators, and new friendships. They have also created new mental maps that form the basis of new communities. Particularly in the Village of Seven Parishes, the new shared facilities have expanded the boundaries of the place where residents feel ‘at home’.

### *Strategy 2: Innovative use of cultural heritage*

The projects examined were often triggered by challenges in the local built environment. Cases 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12 and 13 are examples. These projects worked on the environment’s existing qualities and potentials to preserve, strengthen or develop community well-being, renovating or transforming existing buildings, built structures or landscapes. Site-specific potentials, such as cultural heritage, special landscapes or natural features, played an important role in several projects. This was not only about preserving a valuable building or historical milieu, but also about continuing and renewing local cultural traditions under new conditions.

For example, Frøstrup’s Citizens’ Inn (case 5) continued the historical use of a culturally, architecturally and spatially valuable building in a new context. The Faster Dairy project (case 7) restored a historically valuable building and associated public space that had lost its function; the sponsoring association was proud that in addition to a new shop and business functions, the project had also succeeded in restoring the dairy function, if only in the

form of cheese storage. On the island of Ærø, the old shipyard (case 3) was preserved for DIY ship repair, and the cultural heritage of maritime buildings and functions was transformed into a tourist destination that also provided job training opportunities for local youngsters with special needs. In Junget (case 12), stones from former houses in the village centre were recycled into functional artworks in a new park on the demolished site, evoking the lost built environment and village history while forming part of a beautiful new public space. The port of Ejerslev (case 9) is another example of innovative cultural heritage development. Here, preserved industrial heritage related to the extraction and shipping of diatomic clay was combined with a new recreational landscape. The last example, Østerby's Bakery Museum (case 13), is a more traditional museum, albeit created by local people as part of the village's cultural heritage.

In other words, this strategy is about utilising and creating 'living cultural heritage' where transformed buildings and built environments are not only preserved but contribute to placemaking, functioning as links to the past as well as successful transformations into new ways of life.

### *Strategy 3: Strengthened access to landscapes and nature*

Proximity and access to nature – preferably recreational nature – is important to long-term residents and incomers in Denmark's rural areas (Ærø et al., 2005). However, access to rural landscapes is often poor and continues to diminish (Caspersen & Karlsson Nyed, 2017), mainly because of intensive farming. New demands and methods for access to nature are emerging and the desire to create better quality of life through closer proximity to landscapes and nature is reflected in many projects (cases 2, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 12). New green meeting places and activity spaces create or enhance connections between the built environment and the landscape, focusing on access to and experiences of nature, informal outdoor activities and the landscape as a connecting and identity-forming element within and between villages.

In the Village of Seven Parishes (case 2), a public footpath connecting the villages through the landscape was an important part of the project. The public path project in the village of Klitmøller (case 6) combined traffic safety with public access to the Klitmøller Stream: a new green space was created and the village reconnected with its local landscape. The public space project in the small town of Øster Hurup (case 8) not only changed the organisation of the urban structure, but connected a central public space (surrounded by artificial dunes) to the harbour and beach. The diatomic clay quarry in Ejerslev (case 9) provides access to walks in a very special type of nature (Figure 8.3, top right). Even Salling's aqua park (case 10) provides



**Figure 8.3** New green meeting places. Clockwise from the top left: the new central public space in Øster Hurup; Ejerslev: the new marina with the transformed quarry in the background; Klitmøller: view of two new bridges granting access to the Klitmøller Stream; the new village green in Junget.

access to nature, albeit for a limited interest group of divers. In case 12, a new green space for picnics and gatherings was established in the left-over space in Junget village centre (Figure 8.3, bottom left). Our broader study found a large number of wild camping sites and other ‘entryways’ into experiences of nature for locals and tourists, all pointing in the same direction: access to nature is an important asset for life in rural areas.

Architectural design can support the experience of new public spaces as landscapes or natural spaces. The new green meeting points along Klitmøller Stream, for example, are marked with sculptural architectural elements that invite one to linger and conduct non-programmed outdoor activities in the otherwise ‘wild’ riverside landscape (Figure 8.3, bottom right). In Øster Hurup’s town square, which is surrounded by an artificial dune landscape, one feels as if one is ‘sitting in nature’ (Figure 8.3, top left). The individual interventions may be small, but together they define a larger spatial context and evoke nature, physically or psychologically. New paths for pedestrians or cyclists literally create new physical connections between people and the landscape.

*Strategy 4: New connections to create new mental maps*

The fourth strategy reshapes places by making new connections and nodes in villages, small towns or landscapes. All the cases in this group (2, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 12) also pertain to one of the other groups, but the focus here is on rethinking the village's or town's overall spatial structure to forge new mental and tangible connections and new – sometimes unexpected – understandings of place.

The projects in Øster Hurup, Frøstrup and Klitmøller are outstanding examples. In Øster Hurup (case 8), a new public space, together with an upgrade of the road to the marina and a viewing tower as a central landmark, 'turned the town around', strengthening the connection to the sea and to the port as the historical common space in the old fishing village. This intervention was thus also a framework for strategies 1, 2 and 3. In Frøstrup (case 5), new open spaces were established in front of the Citizens' Inn, and the demolition of two derelict houses on the high street created a new central public space, connecting the all-important public functions of shopping and football with a small park and playground. In the coastal village of Klitmøller (case 6), the pathway alongside the river opens the village up to its landscape, connects two parts of the village via bridges over the river, provides a new short-cut for schoolchildren – thus mentally moving the school closer to the centre – and emphasises the new public space in front of the village's only supermarket. In the Village of Seven Parishes (case 2), the new connecting footpath not only provides access to nature, but also visualises and makes tangible the new relations between the villages. The new village green changes tiny Junget's self-image and internal spatial relations (case 12).

While other projects were mainly conceived and initiated by local citizens, this more overall spatial thinking required the conception and implementation of ideas at the larger scale. Seeing the spatial potential of demolishing houses, changing paths and roads and creating larger public spaces is a competency of design professionals, and architects or planners were involved in the collaborative planning process in all six cases.

*Project communities and long-term placemaking:  
a fifth strategy, or an outcome?*

The projects described above required strong cooperation and project organisation to succeed. Most project owners were not professionals in project management or architecture; they were local people from all walks of life, some with educations or work experience to support the process, others learning by doing. The larger projects were very demanding; they ran for

several years as the project group concretised the initial ideas, applied for funding from many sources, negotiated with authorities and implemented the project (with professional help), all while maintaining the local community's ownership and enthusiasm.

Thousands upon thousands of unpaid working hours went into these placemaking processes, from applications and negotiations to practical demolition, co-building and caretaking. All types of competencies were useful, from lawyers and businesspeople to dishwashers and lawnmowers. Hence, projects created strong communities that often extended beyond the project period, leading to new projects and sometimes to long-term collaborative place development. In several of our cases, the project was linked to others in the same location over a longer period, and we found that local key actors were involved in other projects before and after the case project. Thus, projects can become springboards for follow-ups and create the basis for more extensive change. Some projects were also linked to others in a larger geographical area, and important local actors belonged to project communities that went beyond the case project's location, for example in connection with urban renewal projects or other strategic municipal planning initiatives. The collaborative development and implementation of physical projects was also a way of creating lasting social communities ('we have become firm friends' was a phrase we heard repeatedly).

In some places, project communities have developed into permanent placemaking communities that are constantly working on new projects. In Frøstrup (case 5), the transformation of the old inn was the first of several placemaking projects initiated and implemented over fifteen years. Among other things, a demonstration centre for green energy solutions has been established in a former fodder storage, together with a new traffic playground by the building. Opposite the village supermarket, two abandoned houses have been demolished and the site converted into a sensory garden, which also connects the village's central meeting places: the supermarket, the football fields, the green energy demonstration centre and the Citizens' Inn. The 'Pulsen' multipurpose cultural centre in Balling (case 1) was initiated and implemented by the local sports club and local community in cooperation with three other villages. The idea originally emerged during an experimental village renewal project for several villages on the Salling peninsula in 2005 and the cultural centre was inaugurated in 2014. In Klitmøller (case 6), the public footpath along the stream was created as an extension of an existing path along the beach, which dated from 2012 and was part of the transformation of the historical landing place for fishing boats into a common space for outdoor activities, especially windsurfing, making Klitmøller the capital of North Jutland's 'Cold Hawaii'. A subproject of the current area renewal in Klitmøller, the new path has harnessed the momentum of Cold Hawaii,



supporting the many citizens who were already involved in local development and expanding the project community to include more citizens and more interests besides surfing. The Village of Seven Parishes (case 2) has brought together a wide variety of local actors and associations over many years, developing through several interconnected projects including municipality-driven area renewals and a local church development project in collaboration with the Church of Denmark. According to key actors, the realisation that the villages had to renounce competition for cooperation was an eye-opener and has fuelled new and lasting groups of actors (and friendships).

In many cases, a smaller group (between three and twelve people) formed the core of the project community. The responsibilities of project financing and implementation sometimes placed a heavy burden on core members. In most cases, however, many more people were involved in larger or smaller roles, often as volunteers for practical work. Our impression was that this voluntary work for the community was valuable to those who performed it – often senior citizens for whom it provided meaning and social networks.

It is debatable whether this type of community-building is a strategy, or whether it is rather an outcome for which neither public authorities, private funders nor local organisations can plan. But since we know that such long-term placemaking efforts can happen, and how valuable they are for making and caring for places that support community well-being, it is important that the political and administrative framework recognises and supports them. In most places, the municipality does support people's efforts and help local activity groups through a sort of 'metagovernance' coordination (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009) whereby typically one municipal planner takes a project under their wing. In most of our case projects, the local project owners were content with this help and requested that the planner participate in the interview/site visit. As we walked around with this 'authority person', they would often be greeted by local people.

### **Placemaking, rural development and community well-being**

What can we learn from these examples about relations between placemaking, rural development and community well-being, and about the reality of life in peripheral rural areas today?

#### *The built environment is a valuable tool*

While changes in the built environment are obviously not the only way to improve community well-being, our case studies underscore that the built environment is an important tool for communities to make desired changes

in functional and social structures to enhance community well-being (as defined by Cox et al., 2010). This is in line with other research findings on the spatial component of well-being: community well-being is co-shaped by the spatial environments in which people exist (Cattell et al., 2008), but social networks and relationships are just as important in community development (Blunsdon & Davern, 2007).

Indeed, we find that collectively shaping the built environment sustains community-building. This finding is strengthened and supported by the impressive amount of time, energy and sometimes private investment that community members put into changes in their shared built environments in our thirteen cases. Our broader inventory of smaller and larger projects also reiterates that common places are essential for relationship-building in communities.

### *Place-based or generic approaches?*

From a regional and economic development perspective, Barca et al. (2012, p. 130) note that place-based approaches can take account of unique spatial contexts – understood as ‘social, cultural, and institutional characteristics’ – and that they often activate local knowledge and promote new knowledge and ideas through interactions between local and external actors. Others, such as Gill (2010), argue for non-place-based or generic ‘people-centred’ approaches to regional development, focusing, for example, on equity regarding infrastructure, mobility among central and peripheral regions, education etc. Gill (2010) juxtaposes the two approaches, arguing that place-based development fosters inequity between stronger and weaker places. Olfert and Partridge (2010), on the other hand, state that one-size-fits-all policies are inappropriate because of the vast differences among rural communities.

In our experience, this juxtaposition is not valid. Place-based approaches and placemaking are effective for changing the mental maps and functions of vulnerable places, but the lack of more general infrastructure (e.g. schools) can also be an important (albeit negative) starting point for place-based local initiatives. Place-based approaches may involve a degree of inequity. We did indeed find that the ‘density’ of projects was higher in some rural, peripheral municipalities. Places that are rich in resources – such as potentially attractive heritage, or people who are able to develop ideas, plan, apply for funding, gather a community, communicate with authorities and implement changes in the built environment – can ‘raise themselves up by their bootstraps’ to maintain or create community well-being. Such places seem to be project-making champions; some of our thirteen cases count among them. However, community development is not a zero-sum game, and champions probably also inspire others to start project development.

*A relational view of rural space*

Our study confirms the complexity and the relational and multiscalar character of contemporary rurality. Although rural places have traditionally been viewed as remote, local and inward-looking, today they are often the opposite: they are increasingly urbanised and globalised (Woods, 2019), and a relational view of rural places is predominant (e.g. Heley & Jones, 2012). This means that rural spaces are not secluded, self-fulfilling or inward-looking, but influenced by and in constant contact with wider society, near and far. The cases in our study reveal what this can look like at the small, concrete scale. In Denmark, the traditional village hall was mainly meant for the villagers and their immediate environs – part of the ‘traditional’ view of the rural. What we see in our cases (and in the broader inventory) is a flourishing trend of making places for non-locals as well as locals: activity or cultural centres for a wider regional catchment area or community of interest; points of interest or new open public spaces for locals and tourists alike, including both groups in common activities; projects to access nature that extend into neighbouring landscapes and are meant to be used by both locals and tourists. Last, but not least, the large number of projects in the inventory, together with the case studies, points to local communities’ ability to reach out to external actors (funding partners, authorities) and activate them in community development. Such relational thinking within projects is often a precondition for winning funds; thus, relational rural thinking not only comes from within the community but is also prompted from outside.

*Peripherality in Denmark*

Denmark has a relatively high degree of social and educational homogeneity among social groups and between rural and urban populations, and all its peripheral rural areas are less than three hours’ drive from one of the five largest cities. There is a strong tradition of private–public partnerships, which are also at work in community development projects. The society is highly digitalised, with a large share of the population using the Internet to deal with authorities, shop and work, which makes rural life easier. Taken together, all this endows rural communities in Denmark with the potential to overcome the problems posed by urbanisation, the centralisation of services and the apparently widespread wish among young people to move to cities. Rural communities that build places together for sustained community well-being and quality of life are competent and energetic, reaching out to wider society in relational built structures. They are aware of local amenities in the form of heritage and nature; they look for place-based solutions to problems caused by general urban–rural development and centralisation policies; they are able to develop large, complex spatial innovation projects.

While the general development of peripheral rural areas does not seem to be at a turning point, and general rural policies demonstrate little efficiency, these community-driven projects give hope for the future of communities in Denmark's rural periphery.

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## The creation of child-friendly spaces for nourishing rural areas: a South-African reflection

*Elizelle Juanee Cilliers and Menini Gibbens*

### Introduction

In this chapter, the development of child-friendly places in the rural areas of South Africa as an essential component in overcoming poverty and inequality is investigated. This has been done by means of literature survey and practical research. The main objectives were to provide a theoretical framework through the literature study in support of the development of child-friendly places in rural areas to promote sustainable development, to determine whether a community-integrated approach also showed that child-friendly places was a community priority, to determine how this might be achieved, and to reflect on the benefits and limitations of the development of child-friendly spaces as an integral part of sustainable development. The main findings of this research pertain to the need of placing children at the centre of sustainable community development through investment in early childhood development (ECD) centres as child-friendly spaces, as well as places where sustainable development initiatives in the community could emerge.

While there is a global obligation for the creation of child-friendly spaces to enable sustainable development (Sullivan et al., 2021, p. 18), Africa's children require it more desperately than in any other part of the world. Africa's children are quintessential to its economic, demographic, social and environmental development, but there is a dearth of sustainable planning interventions that specifically incorporate a focus on children's needs (Clark et al., 2020, p. 609). This is an especially critical concern in the African context as, according to UNICEF's *Generation 2030* report (2014), Africa has the highest child dependency ratio in the world. Nearly 47 per cent of Africans are children under 18 years old, and in fifteen African countries more than half of their population comprises children under 18 years of age. In South Africa, the difference in the distribution of child population as a percentage of the total population emphasises the importance of rural interventions to improve the quality of life for children in the

countryside. The overall percentage of children in the South African population is calculated at 21 per cent (PopulationPyramid, 2019), while that of Griekwastad (the case study used in this chapter that provides a perspective of some of the requirements of rural South Africa's and Africa's children to enhance their quality life), is 44 per cent (Frith, 2011). To examine the relevance and applicability of the theoretical perspective that the development of child-friendly spaces encompassed in ECD programmes, the research for this chapter was conducted using the Griekwastad case study, which is a settlement located in the sparsely populated rural area of the Northern Cape in South Africa, with a population of approximately 7,000, of which 44 per cent are 19 years or younger (Frith, 2011). In a collaborative process where several sessions were facilitated by one of the researchers with members of the community of Griekwastad, the need for the establishment of child-friendly spaces was identified as one of the highest priorities. As a result, this research contributes to the global call in support of sustainable development planning which includes natural and open space planning to support the needs of children.

The choice of this case has been the commitment evident to the researchers through contact with the community for improving their living environment, based in, and pursued by, established community organisations and role players in Griekwastad. Exploratory talks between different faith communities from Alberton (where one of the researchers resides) and Griekwastad commenced in 2017 because of informal discussions between leaders of these faith-based organisations. It is important to note here that faith communities, particularly in the African rural areas, play a leading role as change agents (Idler et al., 2019, p. 346). When discussions commenced in Griekwastad to pursue ways in which these organisations could support development, other role players also became involved in the process, such as the traditional leader of the Griquas (King, or Kaptein, Waterboer), the local municipality and additional faith-based communities. It was evident from the beginning that one of the greatest concerns in the community was (and is) for their children and youth. One of the primary concerns of all the participants in this study was the increase of current and new environmental, social and economic challenges for children, which provides the impetus to give serious consideration to plan for and provide child-friendly public spaces to ensure our present and future generations' quality of life. Costin (2015) avers that to invest in young children through ECD programmes, such as child-friendly play spaces, the right nurturing and nutrition and so forth, is one of the best investments a country can make to address inequality, break the cycle of poverty and improve outcomes later in life. The research highlights the unique challenges, opportunities and perceptions of creating child-friendly spaces in African rural spaces where



communities do not necessarily have the support of state, but strive to improve the development of natural, safe spaces where education, cognitive development and independent mobility of children can be enhanced. This is linked to the research of Kessel (2018), who states that play-based pedagogy is the best way for young children to learn during their early years of life. The research further considered how to address the lack of child-friendly spaces in rural areas where limited infrastructure and opportunities are the status quo, and how to enhance the quality of life of rural communities by linking spatial planning approaches, innovative play-based pedagogy and nature-based solutions through participatory planning approaches.

### Child-friendly spaces in rural areas

The planning and development of nourishing and sustainable child-friendly spaces in rural areas have unique challenges, especially when they are considered in terms of the deprivations and dire needs that planning initiatives aim to amend. 'The concept of child-friendly spaces (or environments) has been inspired by the concept of child-friendly cities' (Nordström, 2010), referring to developing better conditions for children by focusing on public spaces, planned and developed according to the specific needs of children, improving health and development skills, and their direct relationship with the natural environment (Nordström, 2010), especially since natural outdoor play spaces are rich learning environments for children of all ages (White & Stoecklin, 2013, p. 26). Rural areas in South Africa are, as in most other global rural areas, characterised by low density, often informal dwellings, a complex community composition and the diverse nature of what is considered quality open spaces that can contribute to overall quality of life. Various causative aspects contribute to this privation, of which the most obvious and critical challenge is the impoverishment experienced by communities in predominantly rural areas, specifically the more vulnerable segments of the population. Women, in particular, bear the brunt of poverty in these areas (McFerson, 2010, p. 50). The difficulties that these communities face are numerous (South Africa Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, 2010) and, in addition to those already mentioned, include the loss of essential natural resources, food insecurity, a lack of economic opportunity, the unmet need for social services, poor education, geographic isolation, decay of the social fabric (child-headed households, crime, lack of *ubuntu* or 'I am a person through other persons' emphasising the importance of societal commitment, one of the indigenous communities' core values), unresolved restitution and land tenure issues and poor infrastructure (Powell, 2012).

Rural areas are confronted with pressing needs such as the provision of basic services, housing and infrastructure, expected to be delivered within limited budgets and timeframes. Often, green spaces (and accompanying child-friendly space) are under-prioritised in these rural contexts (Cilliers & Cornelius, 2019). Child-friendly spaces are often also mistaken to be expensive commodities, while others consider it a luxury and do not grasp the social, physical or cognitive development value of such spaces. Safety concerns are very evident in these rural areas, where safety considerations mostly refer to issues of crime, and design elements, inflated by the concern for personal safety, are critical issues concerning all communities and consequently influence the way in which communities use public spaces. The fear of crime limits a child's opportunity to play in the outdoors, which is problematic for the successful creation of child-friendly spaces within the local South African environment. Independent mobility as a core goal of child-friendly spaces is thus severely limited due to a lack of physical design elements such as fencing, lighting and visibility to protect children from external forces such as traffic, weather conditions and crime-related activities, but also because design of these spaces does not consider the importance of perceived safety (Cilliers & Cornelius, 2019). To revise the planning of child spaces in rural areas, various authors emphasise the importance of integrated planning approaches (Gibbens, 2016, p. 234). Sustainable development planning stresses the importance of community involvement and ownership of their development initiatives (Asikainen et al., 2017). As such, the involvement of community members and organisations in addressing issues such as child-friendly places in rural areas are indispensable. In an attempt to reflect on the benefits and challenges of child-friendly spaces within the South African context, this research and planning process in the Griekwastad case study was conducted as a collaborative, participatory process.

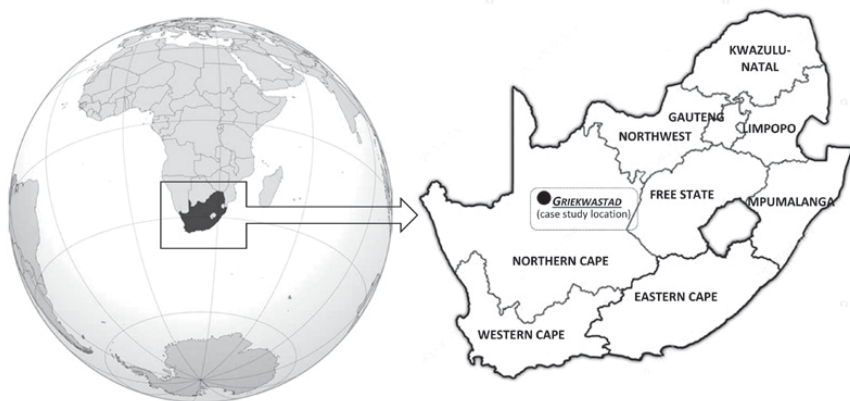
### **Empirical investigation and case study: Griekwastad, Northern Cape (South Africa)**

The confluence of rural characteristics and local circumstances referred to in the previous section are also applicable to the case study which was selected for the purposes of this research. Griekwastad is situated in a rural South African area, and in collaboration with the local community of Griekwastad, the investigation was conducted to reflect on the creation of child-friendly spaces within this rural environment. Griekwastad was selected as a case study because of its location (characterised as a rural space in South Africa) and the possibility of obtaining quality data that accurately reflects the local circumstances and the involvement of 'insiders' because of the continuous

prior involvement of one of the researchers with the specific community. The prior collaboration considerably eased the process of data collection and mutual trust. A constraint, as previously mentioned, namely of the political, socio-economic and racial divisions that sometimes create unseen boundaries and restrictions in these rural communities (Schoeman & Van Schalkwyk, 2013, p. 781), was not evident in the Griekwastad case, since faith communities existed on both sides of this divide. The faith communities in Griekwastad have for quite some time specifically and actively searched for ways to enable their congregants to better their circumstances. Through the connection of the congregants of the faith community in Alberton to the faith communities in Griekwastad, they became part of this endeavour to co-create a vision for the future of Griekwastad. During the series of interactive consultation engagements, it became evident that while one of the primary needs of this specific segment of the community was the development of child-friendly spaces and this research report on that specific part of the broader investigation, there was also a vision that this endeavour could serve as a catalyst for further community development.

#### *Case study location and contextualisation*

Griekwastad is a small rural community located in the Northern Cape, forming part of the Siyancuma Local Municipality, which also includes the communities of Douglas, Campbell, Schmidtsdrift, Bucklands, Vaallus, Plooyburg, Salt Lake, Heuningneskloof and Witput (Figure 9.1). The Siyancuma Local Municipality has a population of approximately 40,000. Griekwastad (or Griquatown, as it is also known) consists of four main



**Figure 9.1** Location of Griekwastad.

areas, namely Griekwastad proper, Mathlomole, Vaalblok and Rainbow Valley. The 2011 census indicated that the combined population of these areas totalled 6,428. Griekwastad and its jurisdictional area covers 77 square kilometres, translating to a density of 83 persons per square kilometre. This renders Griekwastad a remote village in terms of the CSIR hierarchy, or a Category H settlement (CSIR, 2012, p. 11). These are villages that are often located more than 20km from larger settlements, with their catchment sizes ranging from 500 to 5,000 people. Most of the population identifies as coloured (60 per cent), with Black African about a third (33 per cent), and other population groups (white African and other) comprise the other 7 per cent. The primary first language spoken in Griekwastad is Afrikaans (95 per cent). As indicated earlier, approximately 44 per cent of the population is children under the age of 19.

As part of the investigation into the child-friendly spaces within this case study, the Voetspore van Hoop (Footprints of Hope) ECD centre was investigated. The approach followed in the Voetspore van Hoop ECD centre was also compared to other childcare centres as well as government-provided child-oriented open spaces in Griekwastad, to reflect on the wide disparities and challenges within the case study area. Using this approach, several meetings with community members in Griekwastad, including non-governmental groups such as faith organisations, were held, facilitated by one of the authors and including the administration of questionnaires. During these meetings, it became clear that the socio-economic circumstances are dire, especially regarding the needs of young children, youth and women. While the surveys indicated that there was a palpable need to provide for child-friendly spaces, the discussions also provided ways and means to integrate it in the community. The most urgent proposal from the community that was accepted to assist in these challenges was the establishment of an Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centre, as well as a community training and development centre in Griekwastad. The ECD Centre would emphasise early childhood development (with emphasis on the Griqua culture), while also involving them in the permaculture approach towards environmental management.

The establishment of the centre proceeded, supported and funded by members of the community, religious organisations (including some not located in Griekwastad), as well as some of the businesses in the surrounding rural area. As with most such projects, there were many challenges. However, the approach to involve the community in the initial planning, construction and implementation phases of the provision of child-friendly open spaces where education, environment, community, parents and peers can safely and securely provide for the quintessential needs of the children of Griekwastad significantly impacted on the viability and endurance of the

project. This has led to continued community involvement and the growth of primary and ancillary services. Early childhood development classes have been added, while vacation programmes for schoolchildren covering life skills, social development and physical activities are conducted during holidays. Food security has also been prioritised, with the permaculture garden currently (2020) providing 90 per cent of the fresh vegetable needs of the centre (which provides sixty children daily with two meals and two snacks). It has also assisted nine households in Griekwastad to establish chicken coops and permaculture gardening and provide for their family's nutritional needs.

### *Methodology and data obtained*

Ensuring a multidimensional data set to inform the research question as to whether the development of child-friendly places in the rural areas of South Africa was an essential component in overcoming poverty and inequality, a mixed-methods approach was used, which consisted of three parts, namely (1) household surveys which were analysed quantitatively to determine the composition and qualities of the communities involved in the case study; (2) child play-spaces surveys which were also analysed quantitatively so as to give an opportunity to voices not often heard in planning initiatives; and (3) qualitative interviews and planning sessions with local communities which were used to interpret and support the results of the quantitative analysis, as well as their approach towards sustainable development. The community needs were accordingly measured against current spatial planning approaches and provision of child-friendly spaces and supporting infrastructure to draw conclusions on the opportunities and gaps to enhance quality of life within these rural communities, while simultaneously prioritising the planning of child-friendly spaces within a rural context.

The facilitated collaboration sessions were held with community members from Griekwastad that overwhelmingly consisted of the Griqua community, with Afrikaans the main language spoken. These sessions were also supported by local community leaders, such as the king ('kaptein') of the Griquas, Johannes Waterboer, members of different church councils and local municipal officials. Most of the participants in the collaboration sessions were women, some of whom were young mothers but mostly grandmothers, with some men (youths and a few older men). Some informal qualitative interviews were conducted before and after these sessions to further refine the results of the research.

During these sessions, various challenges were discussed, specifically the need to 'get children off the street' and to have some form of economic development. This stems from one of the main concerns raised by the

participants, namely the problem of substance abuse such as glue-sniffing and alcohol abuse by children. This situation is exacerbated through the exploitation by drug and alcohol dealers, who specifically assemble packages that contain both a drug/alcohol allocation with a food packet that should last a month, based upon the value of the welfare subsidies provided by government (either childcare or pensions). There are even places that sell teaspoons already filled with glue, specifically targeting children. One of the primary solutions proposed was the provision of good-quality child-friendly places where children could engage in activities other than drug abuse or illegal activities due to boredom. However, some of the problems in terms of the existing child-friendly open spaces included that they are either part of formal education areas (schools) or fenced-in spaces that are locked (refer to the Mathlomole play space, [Figure 9.2](#)) and only available at specific times (if at all). This, to some extent, is due to safety and maintenance concerns, as these spaces are often vandalised.

There was also some indication from the participants in the community engagements that political concerns influenced the decisions of where to



*Rainbow Valley primary school play space*



*Mathlomole play space*



*Locked park between Vaalblok and Riemvasmaak, two informal settlements next to Griekwastad.*



**Figure 9.2** Collage of play spaces in Griekwastad. Clockwise from the top left: Rainbow Valley primary school play space; Mathlomole play space; locked park between Vaalblok and Riemvasmaak; two informal settlements next to Griekwastad.

plan for parks and what times parks would be open to the public. Another solution proffered was to encourage a self-sustainable lifestyle, to ensure food security and provide food for your own family. The main concern with this solution was the lack of knowledge and proper equipment. Although people viewed chicken farming as a possibility, it was very difficult to engage in, as there was a lack of shelter for chickens to protect them from predators.

To provide some perspective with respect to the discussions held with the community, a socio-economic questionnaire was distributed to gain some sense of the current circumstances in Griekwastad. With respect to the adult questionnaire respondents (sixty-three responses), 12.7 per cent of participants described their household as consisting of parents and children only, whereas 38.1 per cent stated that more family members resided with them in the house. Single parents accounted for 11.1 per cent, and 9.5 per cent were grandparents raising their grandchildren. A significant percentage of the respondents had low education levels, with 6.3 per cent having no education at all, 14.3 per cent some primary education and 33.3 per cent some secondary education. Respondents who stated that they did not have a formal income made up 36.5 per cent, 40.9 per cent reported their household income was below R26,000 per year, and 70.5 per cent indicated their income was below R36,400 per year. It was evident that the females in the household were primarily the income generators, but in some cases (11.1 per cent) children generated income. This 'income', however, may refer to the child support grant. The child support grant is a South African government-issued non-contributory social security grant introduced in 1998 that supplements the income of poor households with children up to the age of 14 years, thereby providing for basic needs and promoting the well-being of the child (Child Welfare South Africa, 2011). Apart from this, 14.3 per cent specifically stated the child support grant as a source of income. The main source of income is thus basically pension and child allowances from the state, plus whatever salary mothers earn elsewhere, most often in surrounding areas and towns such as Kimberley (the capital of Northern Cape and approximately 168km from Griekwastad), Douglas, Campbell, Prieska and Groblershoop (all between 50km and 120km from Griekwastad). Most of the respondents live in a duplex house (34.9 per cent), informal structure (33.3 per cent) or free-standing house (28.6 per cent). No formal sanitation was reported in 4.8 per cent of cases, and 9.5 per cent had no waste removal services available. Most residents (52.4 per cent) stated they did not feel safe in their neighbourhood, although 81 per cent indicated they are happy to live in Griekwastad. Two-thirds of respondents (67.2 per cent) indicated they were not satisfied with the cleaning of public streets and 74.6 per cent were not satisfied with the transport (taxi) loading areas.

A high number (86.2 per cent) stated they were unsatisfied with the sports fields and 83.1 per cent were unsatisfied with the play spaces.

One of the critical issues raised from the collaboration sessions and adult questionnaires was that of child-friendly places, and therefore the decision was made to conduct a questionnaire with some of the children of Griekwastad, to enhance participatory design approaches by including these children in the design process in terms of an 'informant role' as proposed in previous research by DeSmet et al. (2016) and Paracha et al. (2019) linking to the vision of 'research with rather than on children'.

The survey was conducted in Griekwastad during July 2017, with the full consent and approval of parents and caregivers. The purpose of the questionnaire was to acquire some understanding of how and where children spend their 'play' time. An investigation was also conducted to determine the places where children spent their time, outside of home and school. The surveys were conducted with 141 children between the ages of 2 and 17, with younger children assisted by their siblings. As approximately 44 per cent of the inhabitants are children under the age of 19 and the population is roughly 6,500, the sample size of 141 children is about 5 per cent of the child population. The survey was conducted anonymously and voluntarily, in line with ethical guidelines. The questionnaire was created in an age-appropriate manner, heavily supported by images for better interpretation. The survey consisted of five illustrated questions that were explained to the children. The participants were asked to choose an image from different play spaces where they currently play the most. The images ranged from a yard in a residential property to a street, a park, a school area and an open area, and provided the option to select 'other' if need be (Figure 9.3).

Forty-five per cent indicated their current play space is within a yard, followed by 30 per cent stating it is in a park. When the same images were presented and participants were asked where they would prefer to play, 43.3 per cent indicated the park as preferred play space, followed by 30.5 per cent indicating the school area and 16.3 per cent their yard. The results from the surveys overwhelmingly indicated that the children preferred to play in a (public) park and with other children.

The data obtained from the community survey and child survey were statistically analysed based on Cramer's V-test and descriptive statistics to further inform the results. Cramer's V-test identified the effect size and practical significance thereof (a large effect or practical significant association  $V \sim 0.5$ ; a medium effect or practical visible significant association  $V \sim 0.3$ ; and a small effect or practical non-significant association  $V \sim 0.1$ ). For the purposes of this chapter, the p-values are reported for the sake of completeness, but are not interpreted, since a convenience sample was used instead of a random sample, as further elaborated on in the following section.





Figure 9.3 Children survey.

## Discussion and interpretation of data

### *Challenges and opportunities identified from the child's-perspective*

A clear disjoint was evident between 'current play spaces' and 'preferred play spaces', with most children (N=64) indicating their current play space to be (1) Erf – private spaces such as a yard inside residential property (which in these rural environments are very small), followed by (2) the school yard, and most children (N=43) indicated the park to be their preferred play space (Figure 9.4).

When data were regrouped into age categories of 2–6 years, 7–12 years and 13+ years, the results in favour of the park remained the same across all age groups. The Cramer's V-test indicated  $V=0.189$ , implying a practical non-significant association or small effect (Figure 9.5).

Cross-tabulations provided insight on the specific needs of the participants relating to where they currently play and where they would ultimately prefer to play. A statistically significant association was evident ( $p=0.002$ ) and medium effect ( $V=0.259$ ) in terms of practical significance. Of the children who said that they mainly play in the private space (yard inside residential property), 53.1 per cent indicated that they would prefer to play in a park, while 88.9 per cent of children who indicated

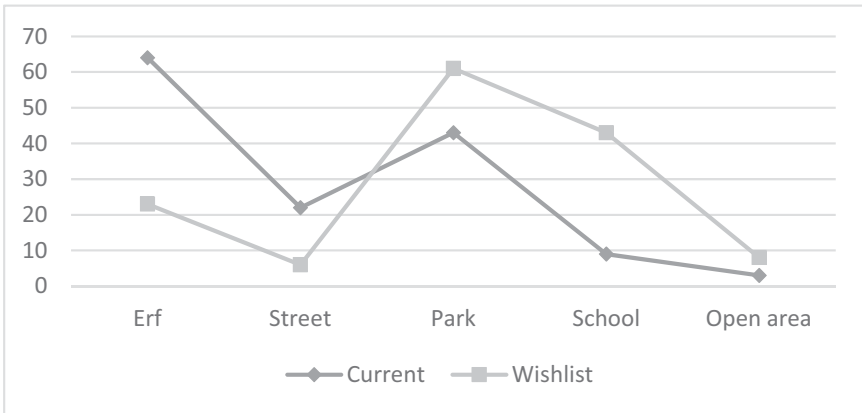


Figure 9.4 Current versus preferred play space.

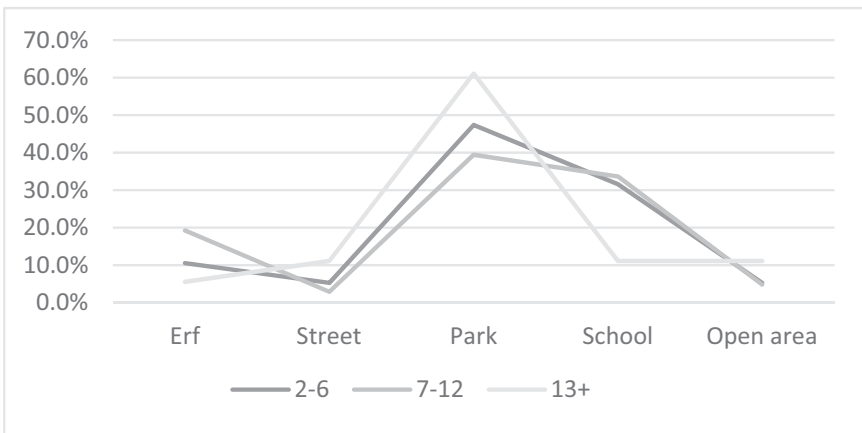


Figure 9.5 Preferred play space indicated per age category.

their current play space to be the school yard also opted for the park as preferred play space. The needs of children for public play spaces were further emphasised by most of them stating that they prefer to play with other children (72.3 per cent) in comparison to 22 per cent who stated they play with their own toys or 5.7 per cent who stated they play with natural elements such as soil, stones or water. Cross-tabulations with the age categories illustrated an increase in interaction with other children as age increases, but a decrease in play with natural elements and toys as age increases ( $V=0.154$ , implying a practical non-significant association or small effect of such). From these results it became evident that there is a great opportunity to create child-friendly spaces within the public domain, following a participatory design approach.

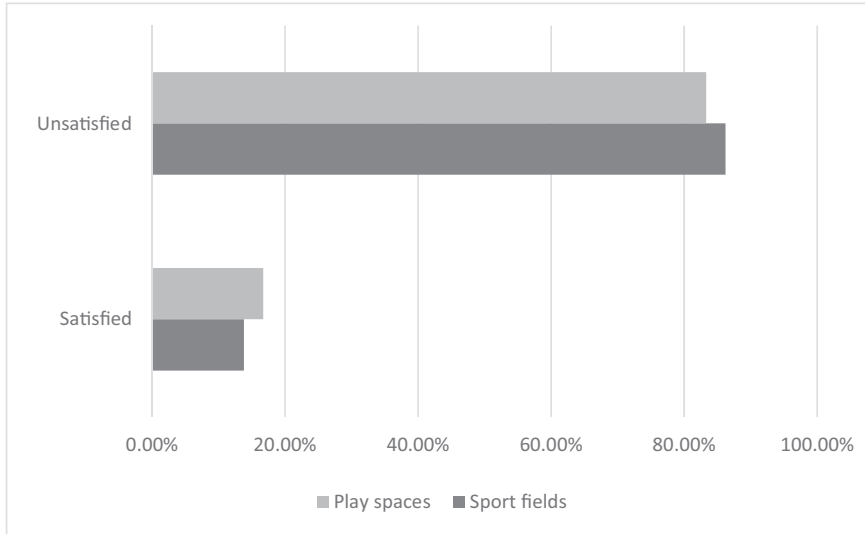


Figure 9.6 Perceptions linked to public parks and open spaces.

Table 9.1 T-test of income and perception of child spaces.

Income sampling	N	Mean	Std deviation	Std error mean	Effect size
Child-friendliness	R0–500	18	2.39	0.916	0.48
	R501+	25	2.88	1.013	
Play spaces	R0–500	15	3.33	0.900	0.22
	R501+	26	3.12	0.993	

### *Challenges and opportunities identified from the adults' perspective*

The community survey illustrated that adults and parents were not equally optimistic about the public spaces in the area, despite the child survey identifying it as a clear preference. The survey indicated that 86.2 per cent (N=58, mean 3.21 and standard deviation of 0.811) of rural residents were not satisfied with the current open and green spaces in their neighbourhood and 83.3 per cent (N=59, mean of 3.23 and standard deviation of 0.858) raised concerns and indicated that such spaces were insufficient for child play (Figure 9.6).

A T-test was conducted to determine the statistical difference between the means of the results of income per household and satisfaction with the child-friendliness of the neighbourhood, as well as their satisfaction with

specific play areas. Respondents earning less than R500 per month were more satisfied with the child-friendliness of the area in comparison to respondents earning more than R500 per month. The effect size ( $p=0.48$ ) illustrated a medium practical visible difference between the mean as well as the effect size. Both groups (earning less than R500pm and more than R500pm) indicated that they were unsatisfied with the play spaces, with a mean of 3.33 and 3.12 respectively. [Table 9.1](#) illustrates the t-test of income and perception of child-spaces as employed in this research.

Rural community members in Griekwastad furthermore indicated that they prefer budgets to be allocated to the development of green spaces and, especially, child-friendly spaces, even if this implies reducing the current budget allocated for basic services and infrastructure. The rural community members included in the survey emphasised (and prioritised) the need for children from rural areas to have well-planned and maintained green spaces. It became clear that the socio-economic circumstances are dire, especially regarding the needs of young children, youth and women. While the surveys indicated that there was a palpable need to provide for child-friendly spaces (mostly indicated in the additional comments section), the discussions also provided ways and means to integrate it in the community. The most urgent proposal from the community that was accepted to assist in challenges such as ‘getting the children off the street’, substance abuse and an absence of safe child-friendly places, was the establishment of better Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres as well as a community training and development centre in Griekwastad. The involvement of the community throughout the project lifecycle was identified as a crucial consideration in terms of the viability and success of the project.

### **Conclusions drawn from the theoretical and empirical investigations**

This singular case study provided qualitative and quantitative evidence of some of the challenges and opportunities pertaining to the planning of child-friendly spaces in a rural context. Most of the qualitative evidence was obtained during exploratory discussions, formal planning sessions, the comments section of questionnaires and the informal discussions that took place during the project’s progress. While several findings might be context-based and case-study specific, it still holds value for consideration within a broader planning framework, sensitising authorities and planners about these cultural and spatial variables that should inform the planning process to a greater extent, especially in the quest to create nourishing and sustainable rural environments in Africa.

*Specific challenges pertaining to child-friendly spaces within the rural context*

The Griekwastad case study confirmed yet again that green spaces (and associated child-friendly spaces in this regard) are often under-prioritised in the rural context. The recognition that children's well-being and environmental issues are inextricably linked is often deemed of little consequence when the provision of housing, water and electricity in rural areas is deemed of the utmost importance. This is especially true in impoverished communities, where there is an even greater need for quality child-friendly spaces that can ensure their current and future quality of life. Despite misconceptions that these rural communities need more pressing infrastructure or services, and open spaces are not a priority to them, the case study indicated the contrary, with most local community members identifying open spaces and associated child-friendly spaces as one of the most pressing priorities. Literature supports the notion that child-friendly spaces are a critical infrastructure need in support of social, physical and cognitive development, and this is even more true in the lower socio-economic status (SES) communities in South Africa.

The Griekwastad case study further confirmed the findings of previous research indicating that the fear of crime and concern for personal safety was one of the main concerns of these SES societies. This is evident in the vandalism of unfenced playgrounds, fenced play areas that are not used and the number of children indicating that they would rather play in parks than elsewhere being the highest (see [Figure 9.4](#)) but are prohibited from doing so as these areas are seen as unsafe. These are critical issues concerning all communities in South Africa and have a direct influence on the way in which communities use public spaces. The research of Adams et al. (2019), which contextualises nature as the 'dangerous other', was also evident in the Griekwastad case study, where parents and adults residing in this rural environment raised concerns about the safety of the open spaces and identified safety concerns as the primary reason why they won't allow children to play in these spaces. The safety concerns are directly affecting the quality of life of these children and local communities.

The lack of well-planned and designed child-friendly spaces within this rural environment, along with safety concerns, has a further negative impact on independent mobility. The findings of the Griekwastad case study align with the findings of the SAHRC and the UNICEF 2016 report which show that large numbers of children are not allowed to walk to school or play outside owing to fear of crime and threats to children's safety. The spaces in Griekwastad where children currently play cannot be considered child-friendly, especially since no physical design elements support these spaces,

such as fencing, lighting and infrastructure to protect children from traffic, weather conditions and crime-related activities. Safety and perceived safety are not considered in the provision of open spaces, let alone child-friendly spaces within this rural environment, having a severe impact on the quality of life of these local communities and children. Access to public spaces and play spaces are often restricted, as illustrated in the Griekwastad case study, which further inhibits independent mobility within these areas. The planning of public goods is failing within these rural contexts and comprehensive community engagement approaches are needed to contextualise the actual needs of rural communities, as well as the public goods relating to child-friendly spaces in a sustainable rural livelihood development approach (as stated earlier).

*Specific opportunities pertaining to child-friendly spaces within the rural context*

The rural context (and natural environment) can be a very valuable community asset and public good if planned accordingly. Spatial planning approaches, in concert with other relevant disciplines, should in this sense capitalise on the natural characteristics of the rural spaces themselves to support the enhancement of the quality of life in rural Africa by enabling the appropriate provision of child-friendly spaces. The research highlights the unique challenges and opportunities of planning child-friendly spaces in rural spaces and emphasises that in concert with community and faith-based organisations in rural areas, quality child-friendly spaces can be provided, specifically ECD centres, where education, cognitive development and independent mobility of children can be enhanced. The annual report for the Voetspore van Hoop ECD indicated a growth in the number of children that are included in the centre, as well as additional community projects stemming from this initiative such as enabling food security and providing vocational training.

The provision of child-friendly spaces within this (natural) rural context would also relate to further opportunities relevant to play-based pedagogy. Since play is the best way for young children to learn during their early years of life (Kessel, 2018), these child-friendly spaces should be framed as critical social infrastructure, essential for the healthy development of children for their physical, social and cognitive development. In the Griekwastad case study, examples of such lessons include a permaculture garden and chicken coop on the open-space terrain which forms part of the ECD, where children learn to practically implement lessons learnt in the classroom. These spaces should not be underestimated, but rather prioritised because of the service they provide to the host communities in terms of a sense of

well-being, improvement of interpersonal abilities, establishment of creating thinking, and enhanced opportunities in terms of exploring and problem-solving skills. The limited development opportunities in these rural areas are even more reason to substantiate the urgent need for child-friendly spaces with age-appropriate facilities, and the impact of these child-friendly spaces (as critical infrastructure) will see an even bigger impact in the rural environments than what is currently documented in urban areas.

Integrated planning approaches provide another unique opportunity to enhance successful community development within the rural context (Gibbens, 2016, p. 234). Sustainable development planning stresses the importance of community involvement and ownership of their development initiatives. As such, the inclusion of community members and organisations in addressing issues such as child-friendly places in rural areas is indispensable. Small rural communities also are further challenged in terms of political, socio-economic and racial divisions that create unseen boundaries and which commonly lead to restrictions in these communities (Schoeman & Van Schalkwyk, 2013, p. 781). Although participatory planning is the ideal theoretical point of departure, much is needed to realise this in the practical rural spaces of South Africa, but this holds great opportunity for the rural environment.

### **Recommendation to enhance rural quality of life**

Child-friendly spaces could enhance the quality of life of rural communities, but would most probably be reliant on (1) an integrated approach to ensure continuous support and expansion of the concept of child-friendly spaces and (2) embedding these spaces as a catalyst for broader sustainable community development. This proposed approach should provide the necessary impetus and continuance of child-friendly spaces that contribute to an increased quality of life in the sustainable rural livelihood development approach.

#### *Integrated approaches to be prioritised*

The case study evidenced that the provision of child-friendly spaces in a rural context (based on the case study research and supporting literature) and as part of an interdependent and interconnected community system would not only improve the quality of life for children in these areas, but also that of the community, both short and long term, ensuring the achievement of sustainable development (considering, for instance, that this project was conceived in 2017 and still exists and is expanding in the area of meeting

the needs of children as well as that of the community at large). Context-based planning is central to the successful implementation of child-friendly spaces and should first be supported by adequate policies and legislative frameworks in aid of community development. This research identified ‘safety’ as the primary denominator impacting on the concept of child-friendly spaces (and public open spaces), linking to previous research that indicated that to be the case for most parts of Africa. Child-friendly spaces should be planned according to (community) use-values to enhance the context and significance thereof within the African environment. The research also considered how the lack of child-friendly spaces in rural areas where limited infrastructure and opportunities are available could be addressed, thereby enhancing the quality of life of rural communities by linking spatial planning approaches, innovative play-based pedagogy and nature-based solutions. However, it is within these guiding principles that context-based planning should be prioritised, to address actual community needs, where child-friendly spaces were identified as a (community-preferred) necessity for social well-being, but also to enhance functionality of these spaces.

*Contextualise child-friendly spaces as catalyst  
for quality of life in rural areas*

To embed child-friendly spaces as an integral part of decision-making and spatial planning, the multiple benefits thereof (for both communities and authorities) should be better articulated. More extensive research that draws on more case studies should be considered in an attempt to guide decision-making authorities away from misconceptions relating to the need for child-friendly spaces (which is currently mostly undervalued). Child-friendly spaces should, rather, be extensively valued and quantified in terms of the broader social, environmental and economic benefits that they can provide to communities and authorities, especially in the African context. The opportunities of rural environments to support the development of child-friendly spaces far outweigh the challenges associated with them and should, as a result, be prioritised in local and national policy and legislative frameworks and driven from a community perspective to ensure context-based, sustainable (quality) living spaces. The planning literature base should be expanded to include the value of child-friendly spaces in the broader African context, along with the application of sound scientific knowledge to set a standard for the planning and design of such, in the quest of enhancing overall sustainability in cities and regions across Africa. In conclusion, [Table 9.2](#) captures a summary of the findings of this research in reflecting on the creation of child-friendly spaces for nourishing and sustainable rural environments in Africa.



**Table 9.2** Recommendations to enhance quality of life within rural spaces.

	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>Evidence from case study</b>	<b>Proposed way forward</b>
<b>Interventions</b>	Misconceptions about the need for open space (and play spaces) in rural areas should be addressed.	Local community members identified play spaces as crucial need, with higher priority than other basic services.	Extensive research to capture use-value of open spaces and child-friendly spaces within the rural context to inform decision-making.
	Lack of quality open spaces for play should be addressed through spatial planning approaches.	The disjoint between current play spaces and preferred play spaces inform the community need and current lack.	Child-friendly spaces should be defined and contextualised as critical social infrastructure and basic public good, crucial for development and quality of life.
	Safety considerations should guide open-space planning within the rural context.	Community stated concerns about safety as primary reason for restricting children’s use of current open spaces.	Unique design considerations which have focused on safety as primary objective should inform the planning of child-friendly spaces.
<b>Integrated approaches</b>	Context-based planning should be mandatory and supported by a legislative and policy framework.	Community need was not aligned with the services and infrastructure being provided within the case study.	Participatory design approaches to be emphasised as part of broader spatial planning, especially within rural environments.
	Nature-based solutions should form a more integral part of spatial planning thinking and land-use management.	No specific evidence was seen for nature being integrated as part of the design of play spaces although children identified parks as preferred play space.	Spatial planning to be aligned with innovative play-based pedagogy and more extensive nature-based solutions to optimise natural play spaces.
<b>Catalyst for change</b>	Child-friendly spaces should be introduced as catalyst to change status quo and enhance quality of life in rural areas.	The need for child-friendly spaces was voiced by both adults and children, recognising the value and necessity thereof for quality of life.	Specific design guidelines should be developed to create safe spaces, educational spaces, which support independent mobility in the rural context.

The litany of challenges facing the creation of child-friendly places, as enumerated in the previous sections, should not be seen as an impediment, however, but rather as advocating for the creation of sustainable living environments where the safety in child-friendly spaces solicits freedom of movement and unhampered participation in activities included in these areas (SACN, 2016, p. 14). This is especially vital in rural spaces such as Griekwastad, where the primary caregivers view this as a fundamental necessity for children.

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## Art in rural placemaking: heritage, tourism and the revitalisation of Longtan village

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### Introduction

In spring 2019, Longtan village, a poverty-ridden and quiet rural village hidden in the mountainous Pingnan county of Fujian province in China, suddenly became a popular tourist site. Photos of idyllic views of this village, its charming traditional houses and the unspoiled natural environment have been widely circulated via print and social media (Figure 10.1). More importantly, the story of its miraculous revitalisation in two years has



Figure 10.1 Views of Longtan village, 2018–2019.

been widely reported. *Fujian Daily*, the leading media outlet in the province, featured an article that reads (Wu, 2019):

Two years ago, traditional houses in this village were in disarray due to the lack of maintenance for a long time and some were reduced to wreckage; a village with a registered population of more than 1,400 only had less than 200 permanent residents left. Now, traditional houses have been restored, the resident population has increased to about 600; the village is equipped with all kinds of leisure and cultural facilities.

By leisure and cultural facilities, it refers to the many public spaces newly established in the village, such as the public art education centre, art museum, wine museum, opera museum, theatre club, rain veranda and central square, that not only provide places for informal daily interactions, community events and cultural and artistic activities in which local residents partake, but also serve as sites where visitors learn about the new developments of the village and exchange with locals. Adding to these is the reopening of the village primary school, which was closed several years ago. The increase of resident population came as a result of the return of native villagers from cities and the arrival of many ‘new villagers’ – urban-based cultural professionals who migrated to the village. Both the old and new villagers have been engaging in the restoration of traditional houses since 2017, along with the unfolding of ‘Everyone is an Artist’, an art-based rural revitalisation project led by Lin Zhenglu, a cultural entrepreneur turned art educator. Their collective efforts have brought a total makeover of the built environment of Longtan village in two years.

This chapter discusses the physical, spatial and cultural transformation of Longtan village since it kicked off the revitalisation project to improve the quality of life for its residents. Methodologically, it combines art historical research, media research, fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, digital ethnography and a study of a variety of documents and reports as well as insights from critical heritage studies in order to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the physical and cultural interventions that are being implemented in the village to advance a desirable individual and collective rural living. Its working hypothesis is that a meaningful placemaking effort cannot be separated from the remaking of people (residents of a given neighbourhood, village or town) and their private and public living environment; and artistic activities can lend their force for personal development and thus aid in the remaking of people for empowering them to assume an active role in the remaking of their hometown. It also sheds light on how experts can exert significant influence in heritage-inspired placemaking projects in China.

### **Heritage tourism and the revitalisation project**

Cultural heritage tourism, as part of China's burgeoning tourism industry, has taken the country by storm since the 2010s, accompanying an unprecedented 'heritage boom' orchestrated by the state in its effort to survey, classify and protect heritage sites, especially those located in remote rural regions. The boom has also made China a major case for critical heritage studies researchers (Svensson & Maags, 2018; Fraser, 2020). From various perspectives and disciplines, scholars have investigated this sudden boom and its ramifications, challenges and contradictions in relation to China's overall socio-economic changes, political and administrative system and its active participation in the heritage discourse championed by UNESCO (Oakes, 2016, 2013; Maags & Svensson, 2018; Maags & Holbig, 2016; Fraser, 2020). According to Smith (2007), heritage can be about any tangible or intangible things because it is 'ultimately a cultural practice' involving the construction of values and meanings. Simply put, it is about what it 'does' (Smith, 2007). Taking up Harvey's (2001) idea that heritage should be seen as a 'verb' rather than as a 'noun', Svensson and Maags (2018) consider heritage to be about the process of 'making', serving 'as a site of negotiations and contestations over identities, memories, and placemaking among different actors and stakeholders'. Informed by these insights, I focus on how the concept and practice of heritage has enabled different stakeholders (local government, art professionals and villagers) to pursue their agenda in Longtan village. After all, Longtan's revitalisation project is intertwined with the region's official heritage-making endeavour, which seeks to promote economic development through increasing tourism potential.

In 2006, Siping opera from Longtan village, a folk opera originating from this region, was included in China's first list of national-level intangible cultural heritage, and in 2007 its rice wine (huangjiu) entered the provincial-level list of intangible cultural heritage. In 2014, Longtan entered the provincial-level list of 'traditional villages' as a result of China's national effort to survey, evaluate and protect traditional villages, considered either as cultural heritage themselves or the sites of heritage. The effort reflects the rapid expansion of the concept of heritage and it now can include vernacular buildings in the countryside, ancestral halls and even whole villages (Svensson & Maags, 2018). These heritage recognitions themselves, however, before being activated to 'do' things, did not guarantee any significant benefits for the village's overall development. As a remote and poor village, Longtan continued to decline, like numerous other rural villages did amid China's urban-focused social development, and most of its young population left the village for better job opportunities in urban areas.

As a matter of fact, the whole county suffered depopulation that contributed to hollowed villages, rundown traditional houses, the closure of numerous primary schools (Jin & Wang, 2013) and the collapse of rural economy and public society, among other problems.

These heritage recognitions did prepare for Longtan's cultural and creative industries-led revitalisation programme in 2017 when the Chinese government increased its financial and policy support for preserving and reviving designated 'traditional villages' (MOHURD, 2012; Wu, 2019; Zhong & Shi, 2020). Specifically, the revitalisation programme was launched by Pingnan county government to tackle Longtan's recent designation as 'a provincial-level key village for poverty alleviation and development' (Wang et al., 2020; Zhang, 2019). Consequently, funding for heritage protection, revitalisation and poverty relief, as well as policy support, converged, which not only allowed significant improvement of the public infrastructure in the village but also provided incentives to support native villagers and urban-based professionals to start heritage-related businesses. Thus, the revitalisation project can be seen as a process to activate heritage sites from 'being' to 'doing' so as to make them visitable, exhibitable, experienceable and purchasable to generate tourism-oriented revenue for poverty alleviation.

Lin Zhenglü's past experience appeared to be fitting for the task. A native of the coastal Putian region in Fujian province, Lin presents himself as a person of exploratory and entrepreneurial spirit. He started a business in the early 1990s trading reproductions of famous oil paintings during which he developed a personal and intuitive philosophy concerning the potential of painting for personal development (Lin, 2016; Shan, 2019). Around 2008, he dedicated himself to painting and offering free painting lessons to anyone who was interested, thus the beginning of his 'Everyone is an Artist' project, first in a cultural industry theme park in Hai'an county, Jiangsu province, and then in Shanghai's famous art district M50. In 2015, Lin moved to Pingnan county and set up a painting studio in Jixia village, a poor village in the county, and his 'Everyone is an Artist' project has since focused on engaging rural populations. Everyone, regardless of their age and ability, can come to take his class, which provides all necessary art supplies. Lin's teaching method can be described as simple and freehand. Students are encouraged to paint whatever things move them, without following any set of standards, since Lin believes that everyone is unique and their way of expression valuable. People of no painting background quickly learnt how to paint and express themselves on canvas. Some of his farmer students improved their financial circumstances by selling paintings via WeChat and other e-commerce channels. It was reported that during the peak time almost every household in the village had one or more family members involved in painting (Guo & Wang, 2018). It was observed that the project evidently

changed the daily life of residents in Jixia village and uplifted its public mentality (Guo & Wang, 2018).

Encouraged by the result and also wanting to include the project in the cultural and creative industries development scheme, the county government established ‘Shuangxi Antai Art City’, a cultural cluster in the nearby Shuangxi town, and offered Lin a large space serving as an art education centre where he continued his project. In a news report, Lin stated that the main target of the project was the marginalised rural population, especially disadvantaged groups such as women and elderly people and individuals with disabilities and not able to make a living on their own (Guo & Wang, 2018). Learning painting, Lin argued, would engage them in creative and reflective processes and help them acquire cultural confidence (Lin, 2016; Shan, 2019). Since its opening, local residents and people elsewhere have come in great numbers to learn how to paint and the ‘Everyone is an Artist’ project gained enormous publicity. ‘Shuangxi Antai Art City’ actually became a new tourist attraction and received an endless flow of visitors, which naturally boosted local tourism revenue (Lin, 2016; Weng, 2019). The popularity of We-media and e-commerce among Chinese citizens greatly facilitated the publicity of the project and the selling of paintings from his students. Stories about a few local students (Shen Minghui, Xue Meilan and Yang Fawang are among the most often cited), who originally had to rely on social welfare and have established their own studios and achieved considerable financial success through selling paintings only one month or so after taking Lin’s painting lessons, are told widely (Liu, 2018; Zheng, 2018; Guo & Wang, 2018; Li, 2020; Zhong & Shi, 2020). So is Lin’s unconventional and open-ended teaching method that opens the door of painting to everybody.

With all these new positive outcomes, Lin was appointed by the government as the chief curator to direct the county’s revitalisation-oriented cultural and creative industries development and ‘Everyone is an Artist’ has expanded from an art education programme into a multidimensional rural revitalisation project, although the stimulation of personal development through painting remains the core idea. It was in this context that he was charged with Longtan village’s revitalisation mission in early 2017 that sought to tackle Longtan’s poverty through activating its rich heritage for cultural and creative industries. Longtan also received administrative support from the provincial government as part of the national effort for poverty alleviation. For example, Wu Mingfeng was dispatched from Fuzhou, the provincial capital, to serve as the first secretary to supervise the poverty alleviation effort, and he worked with Lin closely till the end of 2017. He was then replaced by Xia Xingyong, another experienced administrator from Fuzhou, and he worked with Lin for three years. The rapid



transformation of Longtan from a poor village into a famous ‘tradition village’ cannot be separated from their support and their mobilisation of public approval among native villagers to Lin’s vision of rural revitalisation (Su, 2018; Wang et al., 2020). Xia, in particular, initiated a rental programme in which the village government, after acquiring the agreement from respective property owners, officially leases out dilapidated traditional houses at a very low price for fifteen years (Su, 2018). This proved to be very successful for both raising private funds to renovate traditional houses and attracting artists and other cultural professionals to move into the village. In one year, many urban-based professionals migrated to the village and became new villagers and collectively they renovated about twenty-six traditional houses with their private fund (Su, 2018).

It is clear that the heritage-inspired revitalisation project in Longtan largely follows the typical top-down approach, which is adopted widely in China’s heritagisation process and rural development schemes (L. Yang, 2011; Svensson & Maags, 2018; Fraser, 2020). It is a government-initiated endeavour and predominantly relies on the expertise of outside cultural and administrative professionals. However, while in many cases heritage sites both in and outside of China tend to be packaged for tourism at the exclusion of local communities (L. Yang, 2011; Shepherd, 2006; Dicks, 2000, 2004; Bellocq, 2006; Yan, 2015; Laukkanen, 2018; Oakes, 2016), in Longtan the participation of local residents is perceived to be crucial for the overall success of the project. This is why the project is still named ‘Everyone is an Artist’, revealing that its core idea is not simply the transformation of the built environment but the desire to empower rural residents, a point to be further discussed later. The next section will focus on the physical, spatial and cultural transformation of Longtan from a rundown village into a thriving community that not only regained its distinctiveness as a ‘traditional village’ but also acquired a strong sense of place identity as a locale where residents can pursue a more productive life in an improved living environment.

### **Longtan under transformation**

As a designated ‘traditional village’, Longtan was actually in the middle of losing its original architectural distinctiveness that enabled the heritage designation. Traditionally, residential houses in the region were built in two or three storeys with yellow rammed earth as walls on raised stone foundations, unpainted wood for eaves, balconies, pillars, interior walls and floors, window and door frames, and finally black tiles for the roof. When new, the warm yellowish wooden structure relates with the yellow earthen walls well; over time, it changes into different shades of brown and black that coordinate well with the black tile roof. The locally sourced materials

and simple colour scheme reflect an aesthetic that seeks harmony with the typical natural landscape of the region – yellowish hilly and mountainous terrain covered by trees and forests.

However, in the past two decades, villagers have begun building multiple-storeyed houses out of bricks and concrete, considered fashionable and modern and a sign of prosperity, while traditional houses were relegated as outdated and inconvenient that only people who could not afford a new brick house had to live in. The out-migration of most of the younger population worsened the situation. Many traditional houses were left in disrepair, if not replaced by the more ‘fashionable’ new houses. This of course did not happen only in Longtan. It was a trend rampaging across China in the age of urbanisation in which rural living was stigmatised while urban lifestyle was followed blindly in the vast countryside (Cao, 2004; He, 2007). Numerous traditional houses of distinctive vernacular styles disappeared in the demolition and construction wave of building modern homes, further exacerbated by the 2006 national policy to ‘build a new socialist countryside’. Aiming to improve the life quality of the farming population, this top-down rural construction movement had relocated huge numbers of farmers from their villages to new towns populated with standardised residential complexes typically found in cities, while causing the wholesale destruction of the rural population’s original habitats and their social life, as well as the disappearance of distinctive historic and cultural legacies of different villages (Ye, 2009; H. Yang, 2011; Ahlers & Schubert, 2009).

Longtan village, probably due to its remote location, was among those that survived that national wave of wholesale demolition and construction. Nonetheless, traditional houses were in a dire situation and the overall built environment was far from aesthetically satisfying. Therefore, the revitalisation project started with an architectural intervention programme aiming to revive the vernacular architectural style while introducing new public spaces to foster public culture and social life of the village. The programme, entirely designed by Lin Zhenglu (Wang et al., 2020), includes establishing new public structures, refurbishing existing buildings and improving public infrastructure, all brought in alignment with the traditional architectural aesthetic as he perceives it. It is important to note that the architectural remodelling seldom involves wholesale demolition, which has been a constant process in most government-led rural placemaking projects. In Wu Mingfeng’s account, they tried to keep demolition of traditional houses at a minimum in order to ‘preserve historical memories’ (Wang et al., 2020). The remodelling incorporated whatever structure and natural setting that was originally there if they fit the aesthetic scheme. It followed a simple principle: using local materials and vernacular techniques to accentuate the distinctive aesthetics of traditional houses. In addition, whenever possible, local people would be employed to carry out the construction work.



**Figure 10.2** Longtan Public Art Education Center before, during and after renovation, 2017.

The first and most important public structure added to the built landscape of the village is Longtan Public Art Education Center, which emerged from an originally weed-covered courtyard that the village government purchased from a local family whose house stands right behind (Figure 10.2). The centre was entirely built with wood from Chinese fir, the tree that grows plentifully in this mountainous region, with tiles, bricks, cement and stones used as supplemental materials for areas such as restroom and entrance. The doorway preserved the original rammed-earth-and-brick structure but has been expanded to create a larger entrance space for seating and small gatherings. Entering the doorway, one finds a two-storey wooden and colonnade structure surrounding an open courtyard in the middle, demarcated by wooden railings that serve both as a spatial separation and ready-made bench. Within the railings is the circular and connected workspace where Lin teaches and where students paint, while their finished works can be hung on the walls.

Another important public structure established in 2017 is the rain veranda, which provides a covered, safe and comfortable communal lounge on the riverbank along which the Public Art Education Center and other



**Figure 10.3** Activities taking place along the rain veranda.

residential houses line up. Again, locally grown wood was used for eaves, colonnades and benched railings, while the floor was paved with flagstone. The extended eaves keep the ground dry from rain and provide shade from sun, while the benches are seating areas where people drop by to rest, chat or simply admire the scenery. Since its instalment, the rain veranda has become a popular public site for various cultural activities and communal gatherings, such as traditional rituals, seasonal and holiday celebrations and night light shows (Figure 10.3). Local residents apparently welcome the rain veranda very much and even during ordinary days there would always be some of them sitting on the bench by themselves or in small groups.

In 2018, four more important public spaces were completed: the art museum, opera museum, wine museum and central square. The first three were all restored from dilapidated houses following the same approach adopted in the Public Art Education Center. Longtan Art Museum (Figure 10.4) officially opened in 2019 with an inaugural exhibition entitled ‘The Encounter of a Thousand Years’, referring to both the unprecedented placemaking endeavour in this ancient village and the opportunity for outside art professionals to engage in its revitalisation. Curated by Huang Jing, a curator, artist and writer who was based in Shanghai and recently migrated to Longtan, the exhibition showcased several hundred artworks including oil paintings, photographs and videos from old and new villagers



Figure 10.4 Views of Longtan Art Museum.

of Longtan, as well as students who took Lin's painting class in 'Shuangxi Antai Art City'.

The opera museum was established to honour Siping opera as a national intangible cultural heritage. This was the first museum for Siping opera and with it, Longtan village claims its position as the custodian of the opera and invests in its continuous development in contemporary times. The wine museum was established to promote Longtan rice wine, the provincial-level intangible cultural heritage. While the opera museum is managed by the village government as a cultural facility, the wine museum, financed by a non-local wine company, not only displays objects and images associated with local wine culture, but also sells locally produced wine and related items. Both function as new public spaces to promote the overall image of Longtan as a place of culture, art, commerce, tradition and history and as such to enhance the visibility of its heritage.

The creation of a central square, adjacent to the main street of the village and punctuated by the performance stage on one end, gives another example of the architectural and spatial intervention (Figure 10.5). The construction of this square involved not only converting several abandoned farm fields into a large paved outdoor public area and building a traditional-style stage,



Figure 10.5 The central square before and after renovation, 2017–2018.

but also refurbishing its surrounding houses to create an aesthetically and visually cohesive space, an approach referred to as ‘style regulation’ (Oakes, 2016) that has become popular in rural heritage-inspired transformation of the built environment. The square is located at the outer and recently developed area of the village where some of the tallest new houses that stand there are made of brick and cement. To bring these houses onto harmony with the core architectural style, auxiliary and decorative components such as eaves, balconies, surface walls, porches, columns, window frames and the like, all made with locally grown wood, have been added, along with tile roofs and boundary walls made of rammed earth. The finished square, known as Phoenix Square, has become the new centre for outdoor events and public gatherings, which have contributed to the growth of public life of the village.

These public spaces provide ample opportunities for art, music, performance and cultural activities that promote both the traditional rural lifestyle and new possibilities of rural living. Naturally, new villagers – the urban-based cultural professionals – have taken the lead in championing a cultural transformation of the village that not only introduced new ideas and forms of living to native residents, but also helped them develop a new sense of

recognition towards the value of tangible and intangible heritage of their homeland. All these, together with the increasing opportunities to exchange with people who come to admire the village, have fostered a new collective consciousness about place identity among the villagers. Consequently, many native residents have also become active in the remaking of their personal life, private living space and the collective living environment, which in turn contributes to the growth of the cultural and economic landscape of the village. It has become common for them to make and exhibit art, learn filmmaking, sing and perform on stage, and attend talks, workshops and other public activities. In addition, the village also sees a steady return of its former residents and some entrepreneurial-spirited residents have opened a teahouse, cafe, homestay and other small family-style businesses to accommodate the increasing number of people who come to learn painting as well as tourists, reporters and researchers. By the end of 2020, there were about fifteen homestays owned by local residents, an impressive number that speaks to the rapidly growing economic prospect and influx of population in the village. Some of them would hang their own paintings as wall decorations and continue painting during their leisure time.

The architectural intervention of the village was accompanied by public infrastructure improvements, such as asphalt roads and paved streets, streetlights, running water to individual households, water conservancy facilities and trash and sewage management, which aimed to provide modern conveniences and sanitation to this ancient village. In addition, stone foundations and wooden railings have been installed on the banks of the river and ponds for safety and aesthetic charm, while side projects, such as remodelling some sections of the riverbanks, adding a small pavilion to the landscape and constructing a roof over a bridge, create new points of interest that are both functional and aesthetically pleasing. By 2019, Longtan has acquired a very different appearance from its former self two years before.

At the same time, the whole placemaking project largely retains and even strengthens the existing human ties and familiar landscapes in Longtan, which contributes to the growing sense of rootedness and connection among its residents towards the village. It is a reminder of Clifford Geertz's (1996) assertion that 'no one lives in the world in general'. Despite all generalising trends and high mobility brought about by globalisation, Geertz (1996) believes that the majority of ordinary people still live in specific locations where human ties and familiar landscapes give rise to sentiments of place, which provide shelter against the vicissitudes of life. The collaborative endeavours of old and new villagers have revived the former declining village into a thriving community, or in Harvey's (1996) words, 'a viable homeland in which meaningful roots can be established'. Population has

increased, houses in distinctive vernacular architecture style have been restored or built anew, cultural and artistic activities are held in the newly established public spaces, small businesses are developing and streets and rivers are free from trash and pollution. Meanwhile, its unspoiled natural setting and distinctive cultural landscape have attracted a rapidly growing number of tourists whose visits in turn contribute to local business growth. Simply put, the quality of life in the village has seen an evident improvement in both material and cultural terms.

### **Personal development and placemaking**

The architectural and spatial interventions in Longtan village have unfolded side by side with community or people intervention. This is done through painting, an act presented by Lin Zhenglu as a core strategy in his work as the chief curator of cultural and creative industries in Pingnan county. He argues that painting can enable people to develop observation skills, independent thinking and a humanistic perspective, and therefore can be a useful way for rural residents to enter into the world of creative existence, boost self-confidence and develop the courage to pursue a meaningful life (Shan, 2019). This process in turn is perceived to be able to empower them to assume an active role in the revitalisation of their homeland. One might reasonably doubt whether the single act of painting can indeed accomplish what Lin claims, but it is clear that painting has served as a catalyst for personal development and then placemaking in the region. It is reported that since the arrival of the 'Everyone is an Artist' project in the county, more than 50,000 people (ranging from 2 to 90 years old) have taken painting lessons from one of the art education centres Lin has established in this region (Shan, 2019). Visitors to Longtan would be surprised to find that painting has become commonplace and an integral part of the village's public life. Every day, there are villagers painting in the art education centre; they hang their own paintings on the walls of their homes; the newly established Longtan Art Museum displays their paintings; they talk about painting with Lin, new villagers and visitors. In other words, painting, a typical urban cultural and professional activity, has become part of the everyday life in the village.

Lin advocates a bold message: everyone can become an artist. Obviously, he is not the first one to come up with the idea, since 'everyone is an artist' is a famous quote from the German artist Joseph Beuys (Brenson, 1995; Adams, 1992). In Beuys's conception, however, it does not literally mean that everyone is an artist, like a painter or a sculptor. Rather, he uses the word 'artist' to describe the essence of being a human, that everybody can



participate creatively and become a productive force in shaping society (Adams, 1992). Given Beuys's affiliation with Karl Marx's work (de Thierry, 1988), one may be reminded of Marx's conviction that human beings have an inner need to be creative and productive and self-realisation is an inner necessity (Marx, 1975; Sayers, 2005; Byron, 2016). Lin appears to have adopted the literal meaning of Beuys's quote, since he actually has attempted to implement it, although one can see an obvious problem in that he equates being 'an artist' to merely being able to paint. His 'Everyone is an Artist' project unmistakably advocates that everyone can make paintings.

However, Lin is not so much concerned about whether his students' works meet established aesthetic standards. Responding to critiques circulating on the Internet that these works cannot be called art or that they have low aesthetic quality, he said: 'I don't care about this. What I care about is that they have touched themselves through this artistic act and make life more meaningful' (Shan, 2019). Therefore, Lin's understanding of 'artist' probably comes close to Beuys's original meaning. The 'Everyone is an Artist' project does not aim to turn every student into a professional painter, although a few of his students did take up painting as a full-time profession. More importantly, the project seeks to introduce painting as a new dimension of self-realisation into the everyday existence of rural residents, a process believed to enable them to assume an active role in the remaking of their hometown, including the transformation of their personal life and the collective living environment, for the better. The rationale is that the transformed rural residents will have a new appreciation of the value of vernacular architecture and folk arts traditions in their homeland. Instead of blindly following the mainstream promotion of an urban-centric and consumption-oriented lifestyle, they will have the confidence to create and live their own version of the good life right there in their village. Moreover, with a strong sense of belonging to their home village, they will be more willing to participate in heritage transmission and take initiatives in locally specific placemaking efforts that enhance the overall liveability and visibility of their village.

In this regard, I would like to argue that enabling rural residents to embrace painting as part of their daily routine is a fundamental reversal of the aesthetic regime that governs the operation of the contemporary Chinese art world and regulates the interaction of art and non-art people society wide. Rural residents have been 'represented' by professional artists and appeared in contemporary artworks in great numbers, but here they take the matter of 'representation' back into their own hands and express directly what they see, feel or experience. The art-based rural revitalisation project, therefore, can be seen as contributing to a potential 'redistribution of the sensible' as conceptualised by Ranciere (Ranciere, 2004; Birrell,

2008). Ranciere's insight is relevant in analysing the project's emphasis on painting as an approach to rural placemaking, which implicitly challenges the prevailing problem of education and cultural inequality in China (Yang et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2012; Wang, 2014; Huo & Li, 2012). This is a problem symptomatic of the overall decline of the countryside in China that leads to various rural revitalisation projects like the one in Longtan. Ranciere (2004) employs 'the distribution of the sensible' in his discussion of established rules and norms that determine what people can see and hear, say and think, and do and make. In the world of art and culture, this 'distribution of the sensible' can be understood as perceptions about hierarchy and appropriateness of forms of expression, as well as norms that legitimise inclusion and exclusion of different members of a society.

'Everyone is an Artist' therefore presents a perceptual alteration of the established norm of inclusion and exclusion in the domain of art by encouraging ordinary people, especially disenfranchised rural residents who did not receive much formal art education, to assume the identity of a painter. By enabling their aesthetic choices visible through their paintings, rural residents are conducting a 'redistribution of the sensible' that rearranges what is visible and invisible in the art world and Chinese society at large. In so doing, they create new modes of artistic expression and, more importantly, new forms of life and community for the geographically, culturally and aesthetically marginalised social groups. Several Chinese scholars and rural construction activists have suggested that major problems afflicting Chinese rural populations in recent years are less economic and more about issues related to cultural, social and identity crises (Sun & Liao, 2014; He, 2007). This came as a result of the mainstream socio-economic and cultural discourses that marginalised rural populations and stigmatised rural living as uncivilised, vulgar and outmoded (Murphy, 2004; Hurst, 2006; Jacka, 2009). The marginalisation and stigmatisation have resulted in an unfortunate condition in which rural residents look down upon themselves, lose confidence in their own culture and see no dignity in their way of life (Wang, 2004; He, 2007). This characterisation of rural life, unfortunately, has been used to justify the continuously unequal distribution of cultural resources between the rural and urban areas (Sun, 2012).

Against such a backdrop, the collective effort of local government, Lin Zhenglu and other professional artists in Longtan village and Pingnan county in general to introduce painting to the daily life of the rural population and enrich local public culture therefore constitutes a counteraction to the established aesthetic and cultural regime. It opens up opportunities for the rural population to enter the domain of cultural, creative and artistic living, and in so doing acquire a sense of dignity and value in rural living. Evidently, the physical, spatial and cultural transformations of Longtan

village are the practical outcome of this effort, which will likely continue to foreground art in facilitating local residents' participation in the revitalisation of their hometown and benefit from the process. Although the exact Longtan experience might not be easily transferable to elsewhere, the idea that placemaking is foremost about personal development and local community empowerment, and art in general can play a big role in this line of undertaking, is certainly worth serious consideration.

### Conclusion

The Chinese government in the past couple of years has adopted a more cultural and place-specific approach in its effort to soften the widening rural–urban gap, develop the rural economy and enhance the quality of life in rural regions. This can be seen in the policy initiative of ‘Construction of Beautiful Villages’ (Xu, 2015) in 2015 that has since brought about a national campaign for constructing beautiful villages that, at least theoretically, incorporates not only the usual economic components but also environment, culture, art, sustainability and grassroots participation. This was followed by the ‘Rural Vitalization Strategy’ proposed by president Xi Jinping in 2017 to focus on developing rural China and uplifting the social, economic and cultural life of the rural population as a primary national goal (Xinhuanet, 2018; Mulholland, 2018). In this proposal, culture occupies an unprecedentedly important position and cultural tourism is considered a major strategy to revitalise historically and culturally significant villages.

It is easy to see that the heritage-inspired revitalisation project in Longtan aligns well with this national policy given its reliance on art and culture as the engine for improving local residents' quality of life. For this reason, Oakes's (2013) analysis of heritage-making in China as a ‘technology of government’ and an ongoing project of improvement to enhance social cohesion, promote modernisation and pursue economic development rings true. However, Longtan's case departs from what Oakes (2013) points out as a typical mode of village heritage tourism development throughout China in the 1990s and 2000s, in which the local government usually contracted out development rights of rural villages to outside companies without consulting local villagers. There is no outside company owning the development rights of Longtan. Although the revitalisation project was designed and is still led by an outside expert, Lin Zhenglu, local residents appear to be well informed about it and many of them have actively taken part in its various components. Longtan, therefore, may present a more balanced power relation in terms of heritage tourism development that actually enables local people to experience a renewed rootedness and connection in their everyday living. It is thus a placemaking for the people (Wang, 2018).

While the sustainability of Longtan's revitalisation project awaits to be seen, I argue that it has served two purposes. On the one hand, it has greatly improved the presentation and visibility of its heritage, including the village itself. This enables it to tap into the rising cultural heritage boom and contribute to local economic development. This is reminiscent of what Dicks (2004) discusses as the production of 'visitability', in which a unique 'place-identity' was produced with cultural heritage being staged and exhibited for consumption to outside tourists. On the other hand, the project also appropriates heritage to advance a local community-based and personal development-oriented placemaking discourse that can be described as 'a creative engagement with the past in the present' so that people can take an active role in the production of a better future (Harrison, 2013). This better future is in the making through art and culture-related activities that seek to empower local villagers and aid in their personal development so they can actively participate in the placemaking endeavour of their hometown, pursue the good life on their own terms and advance a desirable collective rural living.

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## The contribution of affordable housing to quality of life in rural England

*Nick Gallent*

### Introduction

The chapter is concerned with the contribution of affordable housing to quality of life in England's *rural amenity areas*, where a combination of planning constraint, low in-area earnings and market intrusion may conspire to lock sections of the population out of the mainstream 'open' housing market. These areas are characterised by concentrations of adventitious purchasers – comprising retirees, life-style downshiffters (many of whom continue to commute back to urban jobs) and second-home purchasers. Market intrusion of this sort has caused a bidding up of house prices in many parts of rural England in recent decades, especially in areas of significant landscape amenity – including 'areas of outstanding natural beauty' and 'national parks' – or in areas of accessible countryside close to cities. These demand pressures lengthen the queue of buyers competing for a supply of homes that is rationed by planning rules which regularly prioritise the protection of amenity and village character over the need to advance housing opportunities and ensure social balance.

Demand bites hardest in villages and hamlets (the smallest, lowest tier settlements) where ex-urban households seek out archetypal workers' cottages to turn into weekend retreats or larger detached houses with gardens, outbuildings and paddocks that become spacious family homes. Rising prices out-pace local earnings, causing a critical affordability challenge in areas of market intrusion. The ratios between median house prices and median in-area earnings become stretched. Prices decouple from earnings, being instead determined by the influx of mobile investment capital.

This critical affordability challenge means that households which are no longer able to compete for homes in the 'open market' look to non-market alternatives – to the provision of community-led, third-sector or public housing either for rent or low-cost sale – as a means of meeting their needs. Without these sources of affordable housing, communities are lost to a neo-liberal logic that disrupts local economies, denies the rights of

households to live in places where they can give or receive family support, and produces acute spatial inequality.

England's rural amenity areas, marked out by intense housing competition, are perhaps *atypical* of rural areas across Europe, many of which are depleting and declining. However, the challenges they face are not *unique*. The same pressures, from adventitious purchasers – especially retirees and seasonal residents – are found in coastal and mountain communities from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean. It is the *combination* of intense competition for housing *and* very tight planning constraint, limiting any general supply response, that makes England's predicament unusual. It means that in every region of England, housing in villages and hamlets is *less affordable* relative to local earnings than in towns and cities. Only in London is housing more unaffordable (Gallent, 2019).

In this chapter, I will argue that access to good-quality affordable housing, while only part of the jigsaw of things that communities need to thrive, is a net contributor to quality of life for disadvantaged groups in amenity areas who have found themselves outgunned in the housing market by adventitious buyers. It is an insurance against displacement and a means of advancing both social justice and the wider well-being of rural places.

The first concern of the chapter is to offer a broad definition of 'quality of life', which is thereafter unpacked into domains of life that link to housing situations. This discussion begins with home life (and its contribution to physical and mental well-being) before being extended into a consideration of social life (connectivity to networks and opportunity), work life (the stability needed to settle down, find work, be secure and plan ahead) and community life (facilitating outward contributions including participation in political life). The dissection of these components leads, secondly, into a brief examination of *tenure*, buying versus renting, and the perception that home ownership, as the 'most rewarding form of house tenure' (DoE, 1971, p. 4), remains a 'dominant pathway' to enhanced quality of life. The chapter concludes by restating the importance of personal housing security, stability and affordability, irrespective of tenure, to both quality of life now and life chances in the future.

The overarching purpose of the chapter is to set out the contribution of housing to rural quality of life, connecting the four quality of life components to individual well-being and the vitality of rural places.

### Quality of life

Andrews and Withey (1976) note the ways in which 'quality of life' can be either *inferred* from *objective conditions* (with an assumed potential to impinge on the experience of living) or *affective*, disturbing the psychological



well-being of an individual in directly measurable ways. The inference of impact on quality of life can be ascribed to many objective conditions, including 'crowding, decibels of noise pollution, reported crimes, income levels etc.' (Andrews & Withey, 1976, p. 4). But the nature of the impact on different individuals will vary, being contingent on personal aspiration (for a different experience), making it selectively *affective*: individuals respond to stresses in subjective ways. The same authors cite Bateman (1972), who notes that 'quality of life is not adequately defined by physical variables' but inheres in patterns of experience rather than in episodes of disruption. Relationships are critical determinants: 'how they stand in love, belonging, hate, respect, responsibility, dependency, trust, and other similar abstract but nonetheless real relations' (Andrews & Withey, 1976, p. 5).

This combination of experiences and relationships is the critical determinant of quality of life: experiences can be inferred from *objective* conditions (including the observation of housing situations), while affective relationships tend to require *subjective* – or psycho-analytical – appraisal. This suggests a boundary between objective and subjective quality of life, with researchers prompted to look for different indicators (hard or soft), but these determinants are inexorably linked: the conditions are stimuli that can be expected, in broad terms, to trigger an emotional response. If housing is *the condition*, then what contribution might good, affordable and well-located housing be expected to make to quality of life? Conversely, what impact on experience and relationships might poor, unaffordable housing that dislocates people from friends and family be expected to have on personal well-being and affective quality of life?

The objective conditions, and affective disturbance, associated with different housing situations are well known. Homelessness, and the displacement from social networks it brings, results in unsettling disconnection. Those who experience it may find themselves in temporary accommodation, separated from friends and family. Homelessness may result from a loss of employment, the breakdown of personal relationships, from a violent domestic situation, and may be just the visible tip of an array of personal and financial hardships. Other forms of housing stress – of the type alluded to at the beginning of this chapter – may fall short of this extreme, but can still signal a serious diminution of quality of life. Where families experience exclusion from the housing market – owing to the high cost and limited availability of homes – they may be forced to move or accept housing unsuited to their needs. These scenarios can see them moving out of a village to the nearest big town where there is a greater supply of private rented housing or where public or third-sector providers are focusing their resources (usually, in England at least, because land costs and planning constraint make it difficult to supply social or intermediate tenure housing in smaller village

locations). Where housing is available in the village, cheaper tenancies may be difficult to find, and so families crowd into homes that are unsuited to their needs. Dislocation and overcrowding (or more generally unsuitable housing) become the objective conditions encountered by some families, especially in rural amenity areas.

This situation is not repeated in every rural area. In marginal or left-behind areas, where rates of economic activity are depressed relative to regional or national averages, income and other forms of deprivation may find expression in substandard housing. And although displacement may not be a critical challenge, the loss of the youngest or most qualified people – who have sought opportunities elsewhere – will contribute a similar experience of dislocation, and potentially of isolation. The availability of good-quality affordable housing offers only a partial solution to these negative experiences. A range of opportunities and infrastructures are needed to anchor population in different areas and give them reasons to stay – wider ‘place effects’ are important. But housing, as an essential social infrastructure, is a major contributor to quality of life everywhere. The goal, in the sections that follow, is to unpack that contribution across the domains of life listed above.

The idea that people’s lives divide into ‘domains’ is not new. Andrews and Withey (1976) sought to separate these domains as a first step towards developing indicators of quality of life, arguing that ‘although not isolated’, these domains ‘were separate enough to be identified and evaluated as a distinguishable part of life’ (Andrews & Withey, 1976, p. 11). In their study of *Americans’ Perceptions of Life Quality* in the 1970s, they included ‘places, things, activities, people, and roles’ as domains of life. How quality of life is constructed within these domains will depend on subjective ‘values, standards, aspirations, goals and – in general – ways of judging what the domains of life afford’ (Andrews & Withey, 1976, p. 12). In short, they relied on more than objective conditions – measured at distance – to render ‘affective evaluations’ of what constitutes the good life for any individual. In this chapter, I can do little more than sketch connections between housing *as condition*, broad *domains of life* and probable *quality of life* outcomes. The aim is to achieve a general view of housing’s place in this sequencing.

### Housing and home life

‘Home life’ is used here as shorthand for that domain of living centred on the home. Home is at once material and social, serving as shelter (with a range of physical attributes) and a place of important social relations and opportunities. Heidegger (1971) drew attention to the wider significance of

home where, through dwelling, people ‘make a place for themselves in the world’. Later writers, building on Heidegger’s thinking, have sought to partition dwelling into constituent domains. King’s work, for example, on ‘private dwelling’ (2004) details the conduct of private lives within the confines of ‘home’. More prosaically, thinking on the function of housing has evolved over recent decades to encompass basic *quality domains* (measured against key parameters – light, space (internal and external), thermal comfort and so on), *social domains* (whether homes themselves provide the right environment for working, learning, eating and living, and whether the location of those homes affords social and economic opportunity) and *wealth domains* (the contribution of housing costs to income inequalities and the wealth advantages of being able to access home ownership).

Work for England’s Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) sought to highlight ‘the benefits’ of good housing (Carmona et al., 2010), noting the foundational work on this subject undertaken by the Parker Morris Committee in the 1960s. That committee focused largely on the needs of families, arguing that

family homes have to cater for a way of life that is much more complex than in smaller households. They have to accommodate individual and different group interests and activities involving any number, or all, of the family, with or without visitors; and the design must be such as to provide reasonable individual and group privacy as well as facilities for family life as part of a community of friends and relations.

(Parker Morris, 1961, p. 8)

The lessons of the Parker Morris Committee, and its broad focus on the social domain of the home, are remembered fondly by housing campaigners in the UK – but have been largely forgotten by policymakers. A detailed anthropometric study of changing lifestyles, and associated housing needs, underpinned its report. It connected basic quality and social domains, exploring the contribution that the design and layout of homes makes to social utility and onward to the well-being of occupants. Aspects of the Parker Morris Committee’s report – published as *Homes for Today and Tomorrow* in 1961 – have been updated in recent studies.

Work for the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2006 included a broad evidence review, extending to case studies of recent housing development and interviews with the occupants of new homes in England (HATC Ltd, 2006). This work informed the draft London Housing Design Guide published in 2009, which tied aspects of housing quality, including space and light, to a broad range of quality of life outcomes. It concluded that a well-designed home provides opportunities to socialise with guests and with other household members, and also to share a meal together (it is a social

space); it affords opportunity for solitary activity (it is a private space); as an extension to privacy, it facilitates private study, for children and others (it is a developmental space); and because of a combination of natural light, ventilation and space, it also facilitates home working, helping occupants achieve life–work balance (it is a work space).

These are, of course, generic qualities of good housing, the importance of which have been underscored in recent work looking at the functionality of homes during the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic. Carmona and colleagues (2020) have drawn attention to the importance of outdoor private space, living space within homes and internal layout. They also noted the challenges arising from poor physical conditions – from a lack of natural light to a lack of storage (p. 2). Better-off households were generally more comfortable during the pandemic lockdown; others, in newer homes and in social rented housing, were least comfortable (p. 1), with good housing contributing to clear long-term health and quality of life benefits (p. 3).

That study found no significant differences between urban and rural housing, although it noted a ‘deepening’ of ‘community support’ during the pandemic that was reportedly greater in rural than in urban communities (p. 24). That deepening of support was more likely to be reported by homeowners living in houses than renters living in flats. Their study gives currency to the general view that good housing is a net contributor to family life, to the educational achievement of children and to economic productivity. It also adapts to changing lifestyles and needs, in general and not only during times of crisis (Carmona et al., 2010, p. 13). Housing has a profound impact on home life. The affordability of that housing is also critically important.

Affordability is expressed in the relationship between earnings and housing costs. For a defined area (i.e. *in-area affordability*), it is the relationship between lowest quartile earnings and lowest quartile costs, linking the means of the lowest-earning households to the lowest-cost housing. More generally, it is axiomatic that all housing is affordable to someone (otherwise it would not command the price it does). For wealthier households, the ownership of multiple homes may be a source of rental income and wealth accumulation. For the average homeowner, paying a mortgage at the beginning of a twenty-five-year loan term may be a financial struggle. But as the years pass and earnings rise (or interest rates fall – as they did consistently in the ten years to 2022, only to be sent into reverse by the war in Ukraine and the ensuing energy and inflation crisis), housing costs become a lower proportion of overall household expenditure. Over the longer term, homeowners tend to enjoy reduced costs and the wealth advantage of equity growth.

Long-term renters, on the other hand, may experience rising costs (in the private market) and will incur no equity gain from ownership. The prospects of rents continuing to rise (and having to be paid during

retirement) is a source of anxiety for many renters, many of whom aspire to home ownership (MHCLG, 2019). The situation for those able to access affordable housing provided by local councils or by third-sector bodies (England's 'registered providers') is different. Rent rises are less, and more predictable, and there may be opportunities to access ownership through shared-ownership schemes. Affordable ownership or affordable renting, of good-quality homes, will mean income/wealth advantages and reduced financial stress.

Affordability adds another dimension to housing's broader quality of life contribution – and also ensures the accessibility of homes to different income groups. The delivery of non-market 'affordable housing' in England's rural amenity areas, for rent or ownership, offers a counterweight to the market distortions seen in recent years, with benefits extending beyond home life.

### Housing and social life

The idea of a contained 'home life' is of course false, existing here only to compartmentalise this discussion. Home is a site of social activity, where important relationships are fostered and take root. However, we can look beyond the home and think about the wider opportunities afforded those able to live in a place of their choosing, close to friends and family, and also the stresses experienced by those locked out of social networks because of the unavailability of housing and their consequent displacement away from where they would otherwise choose to live. *Social life is therefore contingent on being able to exercise choice over residential location.* With their constrained housing markets and sometimes restrictive planning rules (for the reasons noted above), rural areas can be places of limited housing choice, especially when the exercise of choice is dependent on market power – leading to the rationing of homes to the highest bidders.

One might suppose that wealthier households, able to purchase high-end property in villages, would thereafter enjoy a good quality of life, undisturbed by development and with exclusive access to local amenity. But a lack of affordable housing for other groups will impact on local services and on community vitality, as younger families are priced out of the market by older buyers. Intergenerational inequality suppresses the welfare of entire communities, though most directly, it impacts on displaced households.

Research into second-home buying in England in 2005 looked at the propensity of seasonal residents to retire permanently to North Norfolk District, which contains much of the Norfolk Coast AONB ('area of outstanding beauty') and parts of the Norfolk Broads National Park (Gallent et al., 2005). This is an archetypal rural amenity area, with its attractive

coastline, historic towns, important landscapes and abundance of natural assets. The second-home buyers had found everything they had been looking for in North Norfolk: good roads make London accessible, but the lack of motorways to the capital adds to the sense of remoteness. However, those who chose to remain in Norfolk following retirement came to acknowledge how their own market power – predicated on London salaries and imported equity from urban homes – contributed to declining housing affordability and was driving the displacement of young people and the ageing of Norfolk communities (Gallent et al., 2005, p. 84). This resulted in the loss of services that they might otherwise benefit from in later life. The closure of small schools, as children and their families were displaced to market towns, changed the feel of communities. It had a deadening effect. Buses stopped running because the newcomers didn't use them, relying instead on private cars. But most significant for the retiring second-home owners was the lack of young people for the local economy and the struggle to run shops, post office counter services and so forth. Of all the cases studies examined in the wider research – which looked at second homes in amenity areas across England – it was in North Norfolk that the transformation of rural communities was attributed to 'market intrusion' and the lack of affordable housing – ultimately diminishing the quality of social life for ageing incomers. At the same time, families unable to compete in the open market for village housing looked for accommodation in the larger towns – places like Cromer and Fakenham, or even outside the district in Norwich. For some, the move was not entirely unwelcome. Better services and getting closer to secondary schools and jobs might well have been positive outcomes. These are the 'committed leavers' (Ford et al., 1997). But others, for whom existing social networks are critical to well-being and quality of life, are 'reluctant leavers' (Ford et al., 1997) who are unable to stay because of a combination of housing and employment pressures. Young people are the first to leave, often because the housing most suited to their needs – small cottages that once housed farm workers – have now become holiday lets. Pavis et al. (2000), drawing on research in rural Scotland, tracked the housing experiences of young people in the Highlands and Islands. Some were able to secure private lets during the winter months, when cottages were not being rented out to holidaymakers, and then resorted to living with parents and friends temporarily during the summer. Such precariousness in housing circumstances is not uncommon in amenity areas, resulting in an unsettled existence for those households on lowest wages and therefore with the fewest housing options.

Those households struggle to 'dwell' – to make a place for themselves in the world – in the sense intended by Heidegger (1971). Of course, there is also contentment and high quality of life in many amenity areas, especially

for those not directly affected by these tensions and who are socially isolated from the experiences of less fortunate households. There are many examples, particular in the London commuter belt, of gated communities built on the edges of exclusive villages – where house prices are comparable to those of the capital and where residents are cut off from the wider community. Newby (1980) noted the existence of new ‘encapsulated’ rural communities in the 1960s and 1970s: people from very different backgrounds living separate lives in the same villages, the remnants of the old agricultural community and the occupants of the high-end commuter developments that were springing up on the edge of the London Green Belt at that time. Divisions are perhaps not as great as they once were, and despite the advent of gated communities in some villages, a surge in community activism and the promotion of community-led housing initiatives in all parts of rural England speaks to a shared concern for the social life of villages (see Gallent, 2014; Gallent & Robinson, 2012).

There are now many villages that express the same concerns as North Norfolk’s retiring second-home owners did in 2005: a concern for how rural places work and for sustaining community balance. Balance means having a mixed community able to draw on a range of experiences and sustain a range of services; places where people can be born, grow up, remain and work (if they wish) and ultimately grow old. These will not be closed or self-sufficient communities. People will leave for work and/or education, but there will be opportunities to return and ‘slot’ back into the community later in the life cycle. At the same time, those who do leave will still seek work and opportunities – including secondary education for their children – in a key service centre. A central plank of this ‘balanced community’, which offers intergenerational opportunity to a spectrum of income groups, is affordable housing. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the mechanisms by which that housing is made available, but interventions will be needed that break the monopoly of market rationing. Community and public initiatives will be important, which create non-profit and non-market housing options that enable settled dwelling in rural amenity areas.

### **Housing and work life**

Closely related to social life, to quality of life and to well-being, is the prospect for and reality of a work life that provides people with the wherewithal to live and also meets their aspirations. This is not all about housing. ‘Committed leavers’ (Ford et al., 1997) often seek opportunities that are unavailable in rural places. Their quality of life is defined by achieving different goals, often contingent on life stage, and by the desire for new experiences. Ford

and colleagues' observation that escape is often the goal of young people, rather than securing local affordable housing, is an important one. But at the same time, rural places can offer a broad range of employment opportunities that, when coupled with affordable high-quality housing, makes them attractive places to live. Traditional land-based industries are less important than they once were, but new industries – in the renewable energy (aiding the low carbon transition) and environmental sectors – can provide clear career pathways (Scott, 2019). The hospitality sector is also important, as are a range of footloose or tech-based industries that have relocated to rural areas in order to tap into a labour market no longer tied to cities. But the idea of an economically vibrant and productive countryside competes with the presentation of some rural areas as 'retirement retreats' (Lowe & Ward, 2009), in which development is unwanted and unwarranted.

For rural economies, housing is an economic infrastructure that facilitates labour supply. New and relocating industries need housing to be built, although they may be content to see it provided in market towns and other service centres. But for individuals, the lack of affordable housing in places that they would otherwise choose to live, and work, negatively impacts on their quality of life. Displaced households back-commuting from market towns to village-based jobs is the essence of Taylor's (2008) 'sustainability trap'. The need to live close to work is the basis of agricultural workers' conditions (i.e. exceptional permission to build homes for farmworkers, so that they can be close to the farm, which can thereafter only be occupied by people engaged in agriculture) in England. This acknowledges that at least one industry needs a nearby labour force, and also acknowledges that since the 1960s, homes suitable for such workers have become scarce – often because of counter-urbanisation pressures and the conversion of homes to holiday letting.

The lack of affordable housing makes it difficult for essential workers to live where they need to live. If their search for such housing takes them away from the village, then this may add to financial stress as commute costs rise (it may also impinge on the quality of social and family life if the commute is a long one). If, on the other hand, they are able to secure housing in the village, it may either be expensive or unsuited to their needs. Households seek the optimum balance between the cost of housing, work opportunities and travel costs. The lack of affordable housing in villages reduces residential choice, at worst preventing people from accessing jobs and starving villages of the workers they need to run essential services – as in the North Norfolk case.

Very broadly, the dynamics underpinning housing access in rural amenity areas – planning constraint, market intrusion and depressed in-area earnings – limit opportunities for work-life balance. The reality of this dynamic helps propagate the quintessentially English view that rural areas



are for retirement: that overriding amenity priorities correctly limit opportunities to expand housing choice. This situation is rooted in rural land use policy, developed in the 1940s, which

was the product of an unholy alliance between the farmers and landowners who politically controlled rural England and the radical middle-class reformers who formulated post-war legislation. The former group had a vested interest in preserving the status quo, while the latter, epitomised by the nature-loving Hampstead Fabian who enjoyed country rambling at the weekends, possessed a hopelessly sentimental vision of rural life. The rural poor had little to gain from the preservation of their poverty, but they were without a voice on the crucial committees which evolved the planning system from the late 1930s onwards.

(Newby, 1980, p. 239)

As noted above, work life is not *all about housing*, but affordable housing makes work accessible and forms an essential infrastructure for employers. Indeed, the availability of housing is a key factor in investment decisions, causing employers to favour one location over another. Therefore, housing is crucial to the economic well-being of rural areas – and to the opportunities and quality of life afforded rural populations in the future.

### Housing and community life

In this discussion, I have drawn a distinction between *social life* – as something experienced and facilitated by access to housing – and *community life*, to which individuals are able to contribute, and which is supported by a mix of housing suited to different needs. Affordable housing supports social mix, and social mix – a diversity of people, experiences, worldviews, resources and skills – is arguably foundational to social capital. Social capital inheres in social exchange and is, in essence, the power of relationships, or the pooling of the knowledge and resources needed to problem-solve (Lin, 2001). Community projects draw on this store of social capital: for example, where a community needs a community bus to ferry vulnerable people to town twice a week, a group of concerned residents may come together with the fundraising skills needed to secure the finance, the driveway big enough to park the bus, the time and skills to maintain it and the public transit licence needed to operate it. The success of any voluntary action is dependent on being able to assemble the complementary skills needed to achieve a social objective. This is generally true of charities, third-sector housing providers, voluntary lobby groups, community land trusts or interest companies and so forth.

But there is a problem with this positive account of the mixed community working for public benefit. It is also the case that communities without

significant social mix – all retired, middle-class, white and well-educated – have achieved significant success in rejecting unwanted change. In England, for example, there are many cases of such communities fighting housing development, including affordable housing schemes, because of perceived amenity, village character and house price impacts (Hewson, 2007). There may have been good reasons for doing so, but the point is that social capital – inhering in either the mixed or homogeneous community – can be a means of delivering beneficial change or resisting it (accepting that whether something is seen as a benefit or threat may depend on personal circumstances and position).

Evidence points to the fact that some relatively homogeneous communities have a *unity of will* that makes them good at rejecting things, but their lack of diversity limits their capacity for innovation. Mixed communities stand a greater chance of embracing change and being resilient to economic shock. That being the case, affordable (and accessible) housing will be a means of delivering and sustaining that diversity and therefore has a community-life benefit. It brings new people and new ideas to communities and enables their active participation. With affordable and accessible housing, community vitality is enhanced: without it, communities wane. And it is not just about diversity and participation, but also about sustaining essential services – keeping schools open and buses running. When needs are diverse, there will be a market and a need for a mixed range of services. The link to quality of life can be observed at the level of individuals or families, or at a community level.

Housing is an entry point into communities, providing the opportunity for inclusion and the generation of ‘meanings’, and self-worth, that contribute to quality of life (Hughes, 2006). Individuals and families have a chance to become part of that socio-spatial community because of the availability of housing, potentially gaining a sense of belonging that may (or may not) be expressed in the exercise of political rights and activism. Wider communities benefit from vitality of social mix, from the complementary skills introduced and from the dynamism linked to diversity (which may, in part, be agonistic and drive innovation). Taken together, these things produce a community life which is personally and collectively affective. Migrants, and committed stayers, frequently cite ‘sense of community’ as a reason for being drawn to, or wishing to remain, in rural areas.

### Home ownership as a ‘pathway to well-being’

The scan across quality of life domains in the last four subsections has alluded to some of the functions of housing, as a living and social space, and as an important node in social, economic and community networks.

Affordability has been presented as a condition, or an intervention where non-market housing is provided, that facilitates wider access – to a range of different *housing classes*, differentiated by stored wealth and regular income (see Gallent et al., 2020; Saunders, 1984; Shucksmith, 1990). Affordability also reduces financial stress on households, which might otherwise undermine quality of life. Housing has a broader role in household finances – and in wealth creation.

While affordable rents, either in the private or social sectors, will be important to household finances, private residential property is an important asset class which bestows a number of advantages on *homeowners*. Those owners gain a clear wealth advantage because of long-term equity growth – as mortgages are gradually paid off and as house prices rise (as they have done so in most parts of rural England since the end of the global financial crisis in 2009, although there is now an expectation of price stagnation in some areas owing to the unfolding energy and inflation crisis of 2022). This means that over the long term, and irrespective of periodic crises affecting the rate of price change, the home becomes a *savings and pension pot*, with homeowners' costs reducing over time. Owners of course bear responsibility for maintenance, but these costs are not avoided by renters, with such costs being factored into rent-setting. While there are many risks attendant on home ownership, owning their home is, for many households, a source of security and important in the long-term plans they make: where their children will go to school, where they will retire, or how they will fund their retirement, and – crucially – how they will help their children financially when they are gone. In the UK, it has been claimed that home ownership 'satisfies a deep and natural desire on the part of the householder to have independent control of the home that shelters him and his family' (DoE, 1971, p. 4).

Housing is the primary channel for the intergenerational transfer of wealth, with successive UK governments keen to protect housing from inheritance tax and therefore allow parents to pass on much of their wealth, earned and unearned, to their offspring. These stabilities are themselves a source of affective well-being for homeowners, providing securities and peace of mind that are not always shared by renters.

Since the 1980s, and especially since the creation of assured shorthold tenancies in 1989, renting in the private sector has become less secure. The deregulation of tenancy arrangements was intended to encourage 'new interest in the revival of the independent rented sector' (HM Government, 1987) by bringing more investors into the business of private landlordism. It achieved that goal, tilting the economy towards amateur rentier capitalism (Christophers, 2020), but also seeded an unsettled and stressful existence for many households, in urban and in rural areas. At the same time, direct

state involvement in housing provision was scaled back. Support was still provided to housing associations (third-sector bodies, now called ‘registered providers’), but a combination of land costs and grant reductions produced significant downscaling of their operations in rural areas. This means that, today, many rural households face limited housing choice: an owning or private-renting binary where owning is made difficult by the lack of new housing supply, by market intrusion (and the tax encouragements given to investment buying including buy to let) and by low in-area wages that may not afford households the means to secure mortgage credit. Given the advantages of home ownership, noted above, and its links to important aspects of quality of life, it is difficult not to argue for a significant expansion of affordable home ownership in rural areas, accepting, however, that the advantages of owning are contingent on life stage and circumstances.

### Conclusions: affordable housing and rural quality of life

The argument developed in this chapter has been that access to good-quality and affordable housing makes a clear contribution to quality of life across four domains. It is materially important for home life; it situates people in important social networks and is therefore a net contributor to social life; it provides access to jobs and supports local economies; and it is a source of community vitality, underpinning the community life that migrants to rural areas, and also established residents, value.

It is also the case that home ownership has become a dominant pathway to enhanced quality of life for many people, in part because of the challenges that now beset other tenures. For much of the twentieth century, good-quality council housing (built to Parker Morris standards after 1967) offered stability and security to many UK households. It provided them with residential choice and, through a system of fair rent, allowed them to predict costs over the long term. The promotion of home ownership was, in part, a means of limiting state expenditure on housing, and also part of a broader ambition to permit the penetration of global capital into fixed assets, creating new opportunities – through deregulated bank lending – to pursue asset-sheet growth as western economies began to be out-competed by Asian economies in the 1970s and 1980s. It did not, however, reduce state expenditure: this was simply redirected to supporting households cast into the private rented sector (as the public housing sector shrank). Instead, it resulted in the rapid inflation of asset prices and the housing crises that are now apparent across many ‘advanced economies’ (see Rolnik, 2013; Wetzstein, 2017). It would be wrong, therefore, to present homeownership as an *exclusive pathway* to enhanced quality of life in rural areas. This would be an

Anglophone prescription, rooted in the neo-liberal trajectory of housing policy over the last fifty years and especially the financial deregulations of the 1970s and 1980s that gave banks access to global financial markets and therefore supported credit supply, in the form of domestic mortgage lending, and set house prices on their upward path (Ryan-Collins, 2018).

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that *affordable housing*, irrespective of tenure, is a net contributor to well-being – both for individuals and rural communities. Without it, those communities lose vitality, become exclusive (which may suit some residents) and lose much of their capacity to respond to the challenges that rural areas face in the future. They will need to play a leading part in the post-carbon transition, and they will need the social and economic infrastructure to facilitate labour movement and supply (Gkartzios et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/21 produced the spectacle of wealthier urban households escaping to the countryside. It revealed acute housing inequalities across Europe and North America. Its legacy may well be changed working practices and new perspectives on the utility of housing – as a social, work-life and educational space. There is now a danger of some rural areas facing a surge in counter-urbanisation pressure that could impinge on the rights of existing residents if planning systems and land policies do not flex to cope with these new challenges. New exclusions, because of planning and market rationing, risk not only new socio-spatial injustices (that undermine the quality of life of those with less market power) but also the broader well-being and resilience of rural communities – whose futures depend on the capacities and innovation rooted in social diversity. Affordable housing has a key part to play in the future of rural places.

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## Planning for quality of life as the right to spatial production in the rurban void

*Nils Björling*

### Introduction

In the manifesto *Acceptera*, written in 1931, the architects Gunnar Asplund, Wolter Gahn, Sven Markelius, Gregor Paulsson, Eskil Sundahl and Uno Åhren argue that Sweden has to choose between being part of the modern, industrial A-team of Europe, or staying behind in the agricultural, traditional and conservative B-team (Asplund et al., 1931). Going for the A-team, Sweden strategically developed the welfare state during the twentieth century, trying to even up the historical differences of urban and rural life. The call from Asplund et al. (1931) can be seen as a manifestation of a long-term process, starting in the sixteenth century, of state interventions and industrialisation of the fields, forests and the bedrock in order to increase productivity, trade and competitiveness. The development of the welfare state from the 1940s became a huge leap forward of modernity. The result today is one of the richest and top-ranked countries in, for example, well-being, environment, health and education in the world (OECD). But through these economic and cultural changes the urban has also been given priority and the landscape and settlements of the countryside have been industrialised. Uneven development is enhanced by polarisation between places and landscapes with or without a position to influence their future.

Sweden can here be seen as an interesting example of how structural reforms, political ambitions and discursive shifts over several hundred years have been changed to both balance national cohesion and catalyse international competitiveness through exploitation and industrialisation of natural resources, biopolitical control, individualisation and spatial planning (Bengtsson, 2020; Blücher, 2013; Strömgren (2007). Migration towards metropolitan regions, for example, has been catalysed by structural changes in the economy, such as rationalisation in farming and forestry during the nineteenth century and international relocation of manufacturing in the second half of the twentieth century (Enflo, 2016). Increased internationalisation has further enhanced discursive shifts where the city and urban



culture today are given prominence as more sustainable and successful (Rönblom, 2014). The commons and communities of the villages and the countryside have been reshaped. New settlements, landscapes and spaces emerged along with new industries and infrastructures. Transformations, struggles and power relations change the possibilities for both public and private actors to shape spaces of everyday life in their own right, and to plan for improved quality of life (Barracough, 2013; Lefebvre, 1996; Nordberg, 2020; Johansen et al., 2021).

From this background, the aim of this chapter is to critically discuss how rural landscapes and built environments historically have changed during the development of Sweden as a welfare state and to explore how planners and architects today can include plural centralities and practices to generate fairer conditions for participation in the spatial production of quality of life in its own right.

Improved quality of life is on a global level, according to the *Human Development Report 2020*, primarily related to improvements in economic conditions and influenced by differences in access to infrastructure and institutions (UN, 2020). Quality of life in Sweden is foremost conceptualised as the freedom of action to achieve a life that is desirable for the individual person (SOU, 2015, p. 14). The highest levels of quality of life in Sweden can today, according to the Swedish agency for economic and regional growth, be found in municipalities on the fringes of the larger cities (Tillväxtverket, 2018, p. 11). These are locations that exemplify conditions where accessibility to large labour markets, strong development in the housing market and the cultural and commercial activities in the city are combined with access to production, recreation and natural values of the countryside. At the same time, access to a place to live, the labour market, infrastructure and services render a fragmented geography with differences in relation to location in multiscalar geographical networks and position in socio-economic hierarchies at the individual level such as class, gender, ethnic background, income and education (Björling & Fredriksson, 2018).

Swedish spatial planning as an example also illustrates how differences in quality of life are enhanced by the fact that the historical growth-oriented ideal and industrial logic for development today show a limited capacity to counteract geographical polarisation and create national cohesion due to a strong focus on both urban and rural stereotyped future visions of attractive and sustainable spatial transformation (Björling & Fredriksson, 2018). The diverse spatial environment that falls outside the few geographical locations that fulfil the imaginaries of the vibrant urban and recreational rural, is a landscape that in many ways can be regarded as an industrialised *rurban* (rural–urban) void between the stereotyped visions of sustainable

and successful society (Björling, 2017). Seen from the ambition of improved rural (and urban) quality of life as freedom of action to achieve a life that is desirable and the possibility to influence the surrounding living environment, the focus on narrow visions of the urban and rural risks making spatial planning blind to real rural ‘rhythms’ (Johansen et al., 2021), exclude spaces of the rural everyday life ‘in its own right’ (Barracough, 2013) and constrain official planning to contribute to rural potentials and ‘capabilities’ (Björling & Fredriksson, 2018; Nordberg, 2020).

To address quality of life as the possibilities to influence the everyday living environment ‘in its own right’, the chapter is inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre (1996) and his theoretical framework on the right to spatial production. The next part of the chapter introduces the concepts of ‘inclusion’, ‘participation’ and ‘centrality’ and what Lefebvre (1996, p. 123) outlines as ‘the critical point’ for spatial production. The third part of the chapter is a literature-based socio-historical review of policies and the historical shifts in rural spatial development, spatial planning and the Swedish welfare state. The fourth part, based on case studies and participation in planning processes in Sweden, discusses examples of contemporary rurban hybrid situations and potentials for spatial planning to promote quality of life. The last part of the chapter argues that the rurban void creates a critical line for spatial transformation between actors with or without a (political) voice and position to influence spatial production in its own right.

### Spatial production and right to quality of life

In recent years the broad theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre on urbanisation and spatial production has been highlighted to discuss the planetary impact of urbanisation and how urbanisation changes spatial production through both concentrating and extending processes (Brenner, 2000, 2013). Lefebvre (1996) takes his point of departure in the possibilities to inhabit and participate in the transformation of the living environment in the book *Right to the City*, published in 1967. Despite its name, the book focuses on the possibilities to interact with spatial transformations not only in the city but in industrialised and urbanised society as a whole (Barracough, 2013). At the same time, Lefebvre (1996, p. 120) is critical of a situation where both rural and urban characteristics are blurred into what he names a *rurban confusion* and where urban and rural life and differences in production and consumption dissolve. According to Lefebvre (1996, p. 120) the conflict and opposition between town and country cannot be solved through a reciprocal neutralisation. What Lefebvre (1996, p. 120) rather sees as the

result of industrialisation and urbanisation is an urban domination where the socio-cultural opposition between urbanity and rurality is accentuated and the spatial opposition between town and country is lessened.

The historical narrative of the Swedish welfare state, which will be outlined below, is an example of how the city-centrism and urban domination in policy and planning practice have been combined with a political attempt to actively dissolve the differences between urban and rural and ensure equal access to public services, welfare and infrastructure throughout the whole country (Boverket, 1994). Sweden, like many other countries today, sees a situation where the rural also tends to be stereotyped and creates a limitation for a more inclusive planning process. In other words, urbanity as the eminent and rurality as backward are accentuated, while spatial differences between towns and country lessen due to the mix of urbanisation and industrialisation.

In his spatial analysis from the 1960s of industrialisation and urbanisation, Lefebvre (1996, p. 123) describes that access to production of space occurs as a 'critical point' along a spectrum of types ranging from 'completely urbanised' to 'completely ruralised'. This critical point, he argues, marks the discontinuity of political and social engagement between the city and its urban reality on the one hand and rural reality on the other. Lefebvre also states (1996, p. 121) that we need innovations of urban and rural forms and centralities that are free from degradation. We can here use Lefebvre's standpoints to critically question a rural void unfolding between stereotyped versions of city and countryside. Both rural and urban spatial quality of life can be discussed as possibilities to be *included* and given *centrality* in the narrative of the successful and sustainable advanced welfare society, and at the same time to be able to participate and articulate spatial production in its own right.

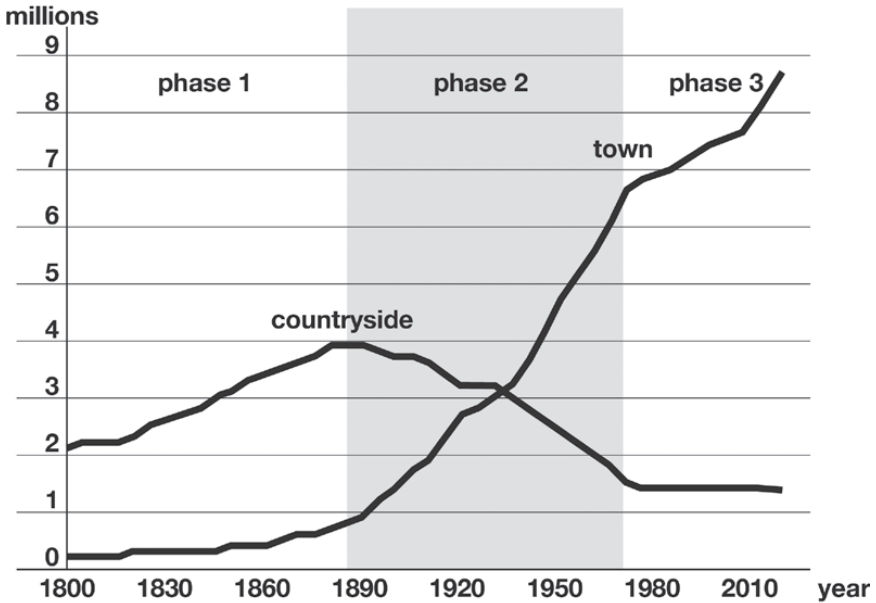
Lefebvre (1996, pp. 144–146) conceptualises *inclusion* (integration), *participation* and the right to *a position in the centre* of one's own life situation as double edged. Authorities and official planning continuously have the power to include or exclude, require participation or self-management, and position geographical locations in the centre or in the periphery. Lefebvre (1996, p. 144) addresses the need for integration of the non-integrated, and points out that all social practices can be integrative, and attempts to 'integrate its elements and aspects into a coherent whole' and 'planning could well become essential to this integrative practice'. A similar approach is addressed for participation where planning authorities such as the state, the region and municipalities can invite actors to be part of a common whole (*oeuvre*) or only require actors temporarily and later exclude them (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 145). Therefore, Lefebvre (1996, p. 158) calls for a deeper understanding of the right to a citizenship based on participation in

society and the right to a position in the centre of one's own everyday life. In other words, to have access to and the right to inhabit one's own life, and not, from the perspective of statutory planning or cultural hierarchies, to be positioned in the periphery of someone else's planned centre; a situation that clearly through the historical transformation of Sweden follows for the rural when, for example, the land-owning elite is prioritised (Bengtsson, 2020), the urban is given privilege (Rönblom, 2014) and for the suburb when the historical city is seen as the core (Fredriksson, 2014).

### **The evolution of the rural welfare state**

The historical transformation of the countryside in Sweden varies between the different parts of the country due to differences in topography, resources, infrastructure, governance and practices of everyday life. Simplified, southern Sweden has a diverse agricultural landscape, and the northern parts are used for forestry and mining. Swedish national, regional and municipal planning has, since the seventeenth century, through exploitation of natural resources, regulation of trade and limitation of risks, been developed to increase national productivity and prosperity (Strömgren, 2007, p. 28). According to the Swedish Central Bureau of Statistics (Statistiska centralbyrån), demographic development in Sweden can be divided into three main demographic phases (Figure 12.1). These phases correspond with shifts in how the state has tried to catalyse exploitation of resources, increase national cohesion and create international competitiveness in a sparsely populated country. The historical phases also showcase how plutocratic governance and social hierarchies have created large political and economic differences between landowning elites and the working classes or how political initiatives and struggles have created more equal terms (Bengtsson, 2020, p. 53).

In the first phase, starting in the sixteenth century and ending in the late nineteenth century, interventions by the Crown in the forest and mining sectors and agricultural land reforms, together with the expansion of trading houses, strong landowning elites and industrial innovation, opened the way for the industrialisation of natural resources. The population in the countryside during this phase was growing faster than the population in towns. The establishment of popular movements, a new working class, a diverse opposition and liberalisation of Lutheran hierarchies preceded a shift where a strong social democratic position from the 1930s made political reforms and the expansion of the welfare state possible. At the same time, further mechanisation in this second phase reduced the need for a workforce in the countryside and the service sector in cities and towns expanded. The growing service sector and the increased internationalisation in the second



**Figure 12.1** Demographic change in Sweden, comparison between countryside and town (tätort). A tätort in Sweden is a densely populated area with more than 200 inhabitants. (Source: Statistiska centralbyrån.)

part of the twentieth century allowed, in turn, a third shift, where the focus moved towards the cities as economic nodes. Since the 1980s the total population in the countryside has been stable and cities increase mostly due to a positive internal birth rate ([www.scb.se](http://www.scb.se)).

### The industrialisation of the countryside

Agricultural settlements in the northern part of Sweden were first established in the fourteenth century when the Church started to locate along the coast (Tidholm, 2014, p. 41). The forests were seen as common land and shared for hunting, grazing and provision of timber and firewood until King Gustav Vasa in 1542 proclaimed that all undeveloped land was to be owned by the Crown (Wetterberg, 2018, p. 43). The possibilities for the Crown to sell or give away land made possible a rapid expansion of the population, control of territory and prospection of the land. Stockholm was strategically located, and the Crown controlled all trade by prohibiting foreign traffic to harbours along the Gulf of Bothnia (Tidholm, 2014, p. 42).

The agricultural sector was mainly transformed through the implementation of three larger land reforms between 1749 and 1827. The reforms merged the divided structure of parcels and forced farmers to move their farms. Villages and communities were separated and thereby possibilities for political organisation were constrained, but population and productivity increased and was thereby often leading to better living condition for the individual farmer (Johansson et al., 2017).

The productivity of the forest was at the same time increased to serve the needs for sawn timber, coal, iron and pulp in Europe (Tidholm, 2014, p. 37). The logistic knowledge of the trading houses in the towns in southern Sweden and the chance to buy the forest for almost nothing from farmers or the state (the Crown) created urban control and capitalisation of the natural resources (Wetterberg, 2018, p. 110). The expansion of the trading houses and the landowning noble houses created new industrial and capitalistic rural–urban alliances (Bengtsson, 2020, p. 83; Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 51).

The rationalisation of agriculture and several years of crop failure during the nineteenth century forced migration to towns or changing occupation to the forest and mining sectors (Johansson et al., 2017, p. 18). The new demographic situation resulted in both spatial transformation and cultural changes where the traditional sense-making (Lutheran) structures and power relations of the villages and the parishes passed over to an industrial and more individualistic logic of production and rationality (Thurfjäll, 2020, p. 208).

In line with secularisation, the traditional organisation of parishes was replaced by municipalities in 1862. During the same period new social movements also appeared, along with new settlements (Ohlsson, 2014, p. 45), for example *Folkets hus* supported by the labour movement, independent churches and sobriety lodges (Åkerman, 2020, p. 14). The influences of liberal movements and revolts from the working class in Europe supported a political ambition in Sweden to improve the social conditions and productivity in the industries (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 96). Political representation was, however, strictly limited to a small landowning and wealthy elite (Bengtsson, 2020, p. 78).

In total, the new industrial society created more similar logics for everyday life and spatial production in all parts of Sweden. The social hierarchies of the villages were replaced by a more individual society where identity and quality of life became based on personal achievements (Thurfjäll, 2020, pp. 104, 178). The natural landscape was also changing due to state regulations and economic conditions when the need for timber and grain increased. Meadows and pastures were either ploughed up or

planted with trees (Wetterberg, 2018, pp. 147, 160–166). A new national identity, based on stereotyped visions of the free farmer and the Nordic natural and cultural landscape was promoted as the role model, while society actually moved away from a self-sufficient agricultural culture (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 94). Both the natural and built landscape were instead transformed through an industrial rationality where the direct connection to the local environment and landscape became more and more limited.

### Folkhemmet

Increased individual autonomy and productivity was at the same time dependent on a strong state that could promote education and social security, a situation that both came from an alliance between the state (the Crown) and land-owning farmers, and from an alliance between the growing working class, peasants, popular movements and the social-democratic party (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 22). This situation was built on a combination of cultural traditions of the free farmer, social values in the village and parish, on social movements based on the increased working class, and state interventions where a social safety net created individual flexibility and willingness to change according to the new needs of the modern society (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, pp. 54, 84).

The ambitions of social cohesion developed by the state in the late nineteenth century were inherited in the social democratic visions of *folkhemmet* presented by Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson in 1928. The spatial consequences were further articulated in the book *Acceptera*, written for the national housing fair in Stockholm in 1931 (Asplund et al., 1931). The state should, according to the social-democratic vision, be a home (hem) for all its people (folk) and at the same time, according to the architects behind *Acceptera*, make Sweden part of industrialised Europe where the steam engine and coal would create dense networks of roads and railways between towns and villages and develop a common culture, a large organism where everyone would be specialised (Asplund et al., 1931, p. 16). This development, according to Asplund et al. (1931), would counteract the opposite where the farmer himself eats the grain that has grown in his fields and where customs and practices differ from one landscape to another. A-Europe was seen as industrialised right into its agriculture and B-Europe was a peasant country right into its cities (Asplund et al., 1931, p. 17).

The implementation of this industrial rationalisation and the ambition for equity in the welfare state was further catalysed by the political consensus and party truce following the economic recession in the beginning of the 1930s and international uncertainty during World War II (Ohlsson, 2014, p. 39).

The strong economic development and export to Europe during the decades after the war further increased the need for production in the forest and mining industries and strengthened the social democratic political hegemony (Strömberg, 2007, p. 15). The economic upswing provided both more jobs and better overall quality of life in the countryside, but also increased migration for better job opportunities and work environment in industry and in the growing welfare sector (Wetterberg, 2018, p. 240). The increased industrialisation and interests in natural resources made visible the need to not only plan for cities and towns, but for the whole country. The aim was to further regulate the use of land and water, protect the natural and cultural environment, and secure the expansion of infrastructure, energy, water supply and defence systems (Blücher, 2013, p. 53). The political ambition was in this way twofold – on the one hand to increase industrial production, on the other hand, to expand the welfare state to all parts of society.

The political agenda was implemented through educational and social reforms and two major municipal reforms from the 1950s to the 1970s. In the first municipal reform in 1952, 2,281 municipalities were merged to 816. In the second step, finalised in 1974, the legal differences between cities (*stad*), market towns (*köping*) and countryside municipalities (*landskommun*) came to an end, and the number of municipalities was reduced to 290. At the same time, the formal use of ‘cities’ and ‘towns’ was replaced by the word ‘*tätort*’ for all densely populated settlements with more than 200 inhabitants (Andersson, 1993).

The spatial transformation during this second phase can be seen as a shift where the welfare state tried to diminish the differences between town and countryside and created more equal opportunities in all municipalities, both urban and rural. The built environment was also moving in a new direction, where the landscape of agriculture, forestry and mining, infrastructure, new settlements and community services such as schools, post offices, public transport and cottage hospitals were developed in a similar manner. The narrative of the modern welfare state included a practical and rational approach where common natural resources were transformed for the prosperity of *folkhemmet* (Tidholm, 2014, pp. 38, 45).

### **Economic crisis and internationalisation**

The finalisation of the municipal reforms coincides with the economic downturn in Sweden following the oil crisis in 1973. The economic crisis influenced several critical movements against the rapid urbanisation, the technocratic public sector, economic rationalisation, gender gaps, environmental impact, global imperialism of the Western world and the impact of



industrial society (Björling, 2020). The political divide between an increased focus on large-scale industrial development of the welfare state or a stronger focus on decentralised decision-making and environmental perspectives on the landscape was manifested in the referendum for nuclear power in 1980: on one side were the social democrats and on the other side the centre party, with a strong position among farmers (Ohlsson, 2014, p. 470).

The social democratic political and technocratic dominance between 1932 and 1976 was criticised for constraining political renewal, inclusion and participation of alternative practices and the influence of other public-private actors in civil society. The countryside was instead seen as a potential for another lifestyle, and grass-root movements in Stockholm were inspired by the communities in villages for a more localised decision-making (Stahre, 1999). The uncertainty that followed from the economic downturn and political turbulence also increased the political will for flexibility, and the planning ideal shifted from the ambition to steer the future to instead adapt to a spontaneous development where the industrial economy could develop on an international market and secure improved quality of life for all the citizens in Sweden through full employment (Strömberg, 2007, p. 171). So, despite the criticism of industrialisation and urbanisation during the 1970s, the Swedish welfare society and industrial expansion were further enhanced in the beginning of the 1980s (Ohlsson, 2014, pp. 45–46).

The reforms towards a more deregulated market and competition were essential for the implementation of the current planning legislation in 1987. The national interests were now included to secure state control of natural resources, cultural heritage, energy production and military defence. On the other hand, the municipalities were given a more autonomous mandate to regulate spatial planning and coordinate all use of land and water through comprehensive plans (Boverket, 1994, p. 54). However, the agricultural and forest sectors were still seen as separate activities kept outside the planning legislation, and a couple of years later further divided from spatial planning on the municipal level and national regulation when Sweden joined the European Union in 1994 (Larsson, 2004, p. 64).

The internationalisation, communalisation, corporatisation and privatisation following the structural reforms after the 1970s and membership of the EU, in combination with the economic crisis in Sweden in the early 1990s, catalysed political initiatives for the welfare society in a more market-liberal direction (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 373). The political priority of international competitiveness within the expanding service economy also turned the interests of the state, regions and municipalities towards the metropolitan areas, with a double-sided focus on both regional enlargement and the attraction of city centres (Fredriksson, 2014).

Following the political discourse since the 1970s, spatial planning has been pushed in a direction where the vision of the dense, vibrant and sustainable city increasingly is seen as a means to create national economic development and innovation and to reduce environmental impact (Björling, 2020; Tunström, 2009). The countryside as non-urban is, on the other hand, by practice and policy, described as backward and out of date (Rönblom, 2014; Stenbacka, 2011). The countryside is in this way either reduced to a recreational and productive area or part of a romanticised idyll important for the image of Sweden as the land of wild nature and free farmers (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015, p. 117; Thurfjäll, 2020). Both the urban and rural, despite critical voices from activists, professionals and researchers that describe the need to differentiate the countryside and the city (see for example, Tunström, 2009; Waldenström & Westholm, 2008), are captured in stereotyped and homogenising imaginaries. In turn, the narrow visions risk excluding the in-between void of industrialised hybrid rural landscapes and everyday practices that have difficulties fitting the visions of the successful and sustainable future of the city and the countryside (Björling, 2016).

### **Rurban centralities, participation and inclusion in their own right**

The historical review of planning and political ambition in Sweden shows how the industrialisation of natural resources and the expansion of the welfare state have dissolved the differences in rural and urban lifestyles (Björling & Fredriksson, 2018). Instead, new spatial power relations, territorial struggles and placemaking in both cities and in the countryside are transforming according to an industrial and market-oriented rationality that expands as a rural void that does not correspond to many of the goals of the sustainable society and thus risks being excluded from the common narratives. Without applicable visions from the official planning authorities, the rural void becomes open for exploitation and can be seen as a front for economic interests. But there are also opportunities for other practices and spatial production based on alternative centralities, participation and inclusion: for example, to develop situations within the planning processes on municipal and regional levels where all geographical locations are given a position at the centre of their own context; second, to develop strategies that invite plural actors to participate in the process of design and implementation; and third, to look beyond the current stereotyped visions and include a broader diversity of meeting places and activities that exist and that take place in the rural void.

*Centralities*

Spatial planning in Sweden is today a municipal responsibility where the comprehensive plan is the primary forum for negotiation between municipal and national interests. The municipal territory does in most cases have the main town in the middle of the administrative area, and the countryside is therefore often perceived and reproduced as the periphery. A seemingly simple problem but nevertheless significant.

One example where this situation has been challenged is the intermunicipal collaboration in Skaraborg, a former county and today a federation of fifteen municipalities in West Sweden. Within the planning process, several thematic layers were mapped and made visible the common landscape, topography, infrastructures, settlements, recreation and labour markets etc. as intermunicipal interests (Skaraborg, 2015). The maps highlight relational networks between actors in different sectors such as agriculture, education and tourism. In this way the hybrid rurban landscape could be differentiated according to local resources and potentials and strategic interventions in, for example, the infrastructural network, and public transport could be identified (Björling, 2016). By staging different landscapes in the centre of their own context, new negotiations and collaborations between municipalities and private actors have been possible. For example, how welfare distribution can be shared between municipalities, how subregional support systems can strengthen planning competence and how nodes for the tourist sector can be included as service points for permanent residents and everyday life.

The work in Skaraborg exemplifies how a shift in perspective from the individual municipality to a context where the systemic relations between different parts of the landscape can open up for a more holistic geographical understanding. This is, however, a fragile process, where the dominant focus on cities is still strong in the political growth-oriented discourse. There are thus limited opportunities today for residents outside the city centres to develop the centre of their own surroundings as they are continuously limited by the fact that planning for infrastructure and welfare production starts in the cities as centralities.

*Participation*

However, the focus on cities as centralities also makes it possible for new practices to be established outside the field of sight of official planning and where the growth economy provides other opportunities to develop participation in spatial production. In recent years there have been several recognised examples of communities in Sweden (see for example Flyinge, Svågadalen, Bottna and Docksta) that showcase the potential of new opportunities to

develop the quality of the everyday environment – new activities, meeting places, commons and centralities, examples of rurban hybrids that combine the landscape, buildings and infrastructure of the countryside with functions of the city like tourism, culture, the market and jobs.

One interesting example is Uddebo in Tranemo municipality in Västergötland, a village where economic downturn after the closure of the textile industry in 2012 led to cheap houses. The village, left by the industry and with little attention from the municipality, gained attention from individuals who wanted to move out from the cities and develop other lifestyles and businesses. The low housing costs have made it possible for the new residents to not work full time and instead spend time with the family and on other interests (Åkerman, 2020, p. 45). Uddebo has in this way seen several collective initiatives developed by residents having time to invest in projects. The process started through the renovation of an old building to create a community and culture house and has later developed festivals and other buildings such as a sauna, a playground and a community garden, and a smaller group of residents are now building new tiny residential houses.

Other similar examples are Röstånga in Svalöv municipality in Skåne, where residents have created a common development company to fund common projects in the village, and Fengersfors in Åmål municipality in Dalsland, where an old paper mill after closure has provided conditions for a craft collective to develop workshops, exhibition spaces, shops, businesses and a cafe that today is a vital node for tourism.

The villages are examples of participation where residents highlight the need to develop relations, knowledge and cooperation through the making of real spatial projects but also where plural public and private actors contribute with different knowledge, resources and mandates (Björling, 2016). It is important, however, to critically discuss how these initiatives are developed by individuals and groups that have a position and knowledge about how to make use of funding from the public sector and how to build projects that gain attention from an urban middle class. They are in this way playing with the potential of the rurban hybrid by combining the landscape and buildings of the countryside with the institutional infrastructure and labour market in the cities. By doing so they also risk falling into the stereotypical vision of the historical self-sufficient and self-organising countryside.

Self-organisation is in this way a possibility of the rurban void, but is also forced when the public and commercial sectors withdraw or look in another direction. The double-sided aspects of participation as Lefebvre (1996, p. 145) discusses is here made visible as both a potential and a constraint when the public sector lacks resources or interest. Seen from a perspective where several municipalities in Sweden today have difficulties locating themselves in the centre of their own spatial production and lack resources

to maintain welfare systems, invitations to plural actors can be seen as an option. The municipality, but also other strong private interests, can create stability over time and invite plural actors to participate and contribute on their own terms (Åkerman, 2020, p. 39). It is crucial, however, to make visible the power relations between involved actors and make visible how easily structural changes may destroy local engagement and desires.

A similar concern for the unequal power relations between actors involved in spatial transformation also needs to be discussed between local actors. The relatively small spatial initiatives in the villages to improve the spaces of everyday life mentioned above risk being invisible in relation to, for example, the massive spatial impact that follows from changed practices in the agricultural sector – for example, clear felling of the forest, growing of new crops or prospecting within the mining industry. A more diverse population and plural future interests in a bio-based economy make visible these potential conflicts in land use between, for example, the forest as an industrial production site and a recreational and natural value. Here again, the planning and design process is a tool that can stage arenas for participation and negotiation between the different individual and common interests of the rural void.

### *Inclusion*

The third theme highlighted by Lefebvre (1996) addresses the needs for planning authorities to include plural centralities and plural actors mentioned above. But based on experience from case studies today, professionals and politicians working with spatial planning also need to broaden their perspectives and consider the physical environments that do not fit within the stereotyped visions of the sustainable society: the dense, smart, green and lively city and the quiet and scenic countryside with high natural values. For example, they need to develop new imaginaries for the urban fringes, shopping malls, camping areas, amusement parks, service points along the motorway, villa areas and towns and settlements on the edge of the metropolitan labour markets or left by industrial interests: overall, to include areas in the rural void that have a large impact on spatial production and quality of the living environment, for example non-profit actors and local associations that create and maintain meeting places such as sports grounds, community centres, beaches, folketshus and independent churches – real existing spatial rationality where spatial production and inclusion for participation are open for some and limited for others.

A commercial example is Torp in Uddevalla municipality in Bohuslän, a large shopping centre at the intersection of road E6 and road 44 that over recent decades has created a strong commercial node and redirected public transport. Another example is Charlottenberg in Eda municipality in

Värmland, where the border with Norway creates commercial opportunities that both provide the surrounding area with commercial services that the area could not support on its own, but also challenges existing centralities and limits the possibilities for commercial services in the old towns and villages.

Torp and Charlottenberg are examples of the meeting places for everyday life that today is the reality in the rurban void but tends to be excluded from the stereotyped vision of the sustainable future. Overall, these examples showcase the need for planning practice, policy-making and research to change perspective to include alternative centralities and the participation of their actors in order to counteract the narrow future of a few stereotypes. By including a broader diversity of geographical situations and expanding the space for participation among those who live and work there, the opportunities to counteract ongoing socio-economic polarisation might increase.

### **Along the critical line**

The examples discussed above indicate that the critical point of political and social engagement that Lefebvre (1996, p. 123) identified between the city and countryside today in Sweden does not appear foremost between different categories of landscapes but between actors and geographies with or without a political voice and economic situation to change their future. Seen from the perspective of the transformation of Sweden since Lefebvre presented his work in the 1960s, the critical point can instead be seen as a critical line stretching through the whole spectrum of typologies in the rurban void, a divide between individuals and groups and geographical territories, networks and places, with or without the possibility to articulate their own needs for centrality, participation and inclusion. Differences in quality of life and spatial production are related to a broad spectrum of intersectional aspects such as class, gender, education and ethnicity, and geographic location is only one of many aspects of spatial power relations.

The rurban void is a concept that tries to address this fragmented and diverse landscape of territorial struggles and placemaking excluded by rural and urban stereotypes. As the examples above make clear, planning on a local, municipal, regional and national level can provide space for alternative practices to develop and thus extend the freedom to influence the spatial living environment in its own right and thereby increase quality of life in the rurban void.

In the final part of the chapter 'Around the critical point', Lefebvre (1996, p. 132) writes: 'The "urban" can only be confined to a strategy prioritising the urban problematic, the intensification of the urban life, the effective realisation of urban society (that is, its morphological, material and practico-material base)'. A similar approach can be applied to the entire spectrum

of the rurban void. Following the call from Lefebvre, planning and design strategies are needed that can provide support to ‘intensify’ the specific life, the specific community and their sensemaking of places and landscapes.

Public and private actors in the planning process and academic research should support this call for action by actively including actors that today are missing in the planning process and insisting on their participation on equal terms. The planning and design process should be used to identify the space of manoeuvre and responsibility for actors involved, and to stage negotiations in order to model alternatives. In turn, articulated alternatives make it possible to choose, argue and confront solutions beyond the current situation. Current political debate in Sweden that addresses increased inequalities and polarisation between different regions and municipalities may be seen as an opportunity for a new political practice and social contract for a more equal recognition of different landscapes, communities and individuals. One possible point of departure is to include the plural centralities that already exist in the rurban void outside current stereotypes, to learn from and give further space for participation to those alternative practices that take place outside the field of official planning. In this way emerging ruptures in the rurban void can be used to make visible and generate new possibilities and knowledge for spatial production and improved quality of life in its own right.

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# Part III

Civil society



# Framing essay III

*Evald Bundgård Iversen*

## Introduction

As we saw in the introduction of the book, recent findings have indicated that self-reported quality of life is higher in rural areas than in the city (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015; Burger et al., 2020; Dijkstra, 2020; Lolle & Andersen, 2019; Sørensen, 2018). This has fuelled a debate on what might influence quality of life in rural areas. A relevant point of departure for pinpointing what might matter for quality of life in rural areas is departing from the more general knowledge we have on what influences quality of life. Some of the major findings in the research literature are that social relations and social trust are positively associated with self-assessed quality of life (see, for example, Delhey & Dragolow, 2016; Smith, 2016; Helliwell et al., 2020). Also, public authorities and researchers have shown an interest in the impact of participation in civil society for members and volunteers, including health benefits (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Casiday et al., 2008) and quality of life in general. These findings point to different aspects of how and why civil society might contribute to quality of life in rural areas. In this section we will focus on the possible role civil society might play for quality of life of individuals in rural areas.

In this framing chapter we assess the role civil society might have for quality of life in rural areas. The causes mentioned above arguably seems to be particularly relevant for quality of life in rural areas as organised civil society in different national contexts are stronger in rural areas (see chapters by Iversen et al. and Frisvoll et al.). Contrary to the general aspects mentioned above (for example social trust), civil society might play a particularly important role for quality of life in rural areas. Contrary to the role civil society might play in more urbanised areas, where civil society might create development in a more or less fruitful co-creation with many other types of (commercial) organisations and interests, civil society is arguably one of the important driving forces for development in rural areas. Even though many of the decentralised welfare institutions (such as public schools

or kindergartens), shops and industries are no longer viable to operate in rural areas, and therefore are ‘closed’, civil society remains ‘open’.

Hence, civil society possibly arguably plays a very important role in rural areas as the ‘last person and organisation standing’ when individuals and organisations have left. Because there are fewer possibilities with regard to finding work, and fewer institutions exist locally in many rural areas, the choice of living in a rural area today is more often the result of a choice rather than a necessity due to having to live where you work (Wallace et al., 2017). However, few studies have addressed the question of how civil society in rural areas might influence individuals’ quality of life. This section of the book presents five different perspectives on how civil society in rural areas might influence quality of life in rural areas.

### **Different ways of participating in civil society**

Much research has shown that volunteering and participation in civil society have a positive effect on the social support for individuals involved – and social support is likely to translate into higher quality of life (Smith, 2016). But it is obviously possible to participate in many different ways, and a relevant question is therefore which different types of participation exist and whether they have all been shown to positively influence quality of life. To get nearer an understanding of how different types of participation in civil society and quality of life might be linked, it is therefore relevant to consider the many different ways it is possible for individuals to participate in civil society.

The least demanding type of participation is arguably participating in cultural, leisure and sports activities, many of which take part in associations or informal groups which to a greater or lesser extent are linked to civil society. Studies of participation show a correlation between quality of life and ‘participation’ in cultural, leisure and sports activities (Snyder et al., 2010; Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011; Downward & Rasciute, 2011; Gopinath et al., 2012; Becchetti et al., 2012; Young et al., 2013; Wheatley & Bickerton, 2017).

An arguably deeper and more engaged connection to civil society is created when an individual signs up for membership in an organisation. Membership in an organisation will often refer to less commitment than being a volunteer, which we will get back to in a section below, but more commitment than ‘merely’ being a participant in an activity. Research has shown that being a member does seem to have a positive impact on self-assessed quality of life (Cutler, 1976, 1982; Helliwell, 2002; Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Wallace & Pichler, 2009; Eime et al., 2010).

Finally, an even more demanding relation to civil society is via being a volunteer in organised civil society. Being, for example, a coach, or taking part in boards or the like indicates a level of involvement that is more invasive than being a participant or a member. Studies of the consequences of ‘volunteering’ indicate that volunteering has a positive impact on self-assessed quality of life and happiness (Wheeler et al., 1998; Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Loga, 2010; Tiefenbach & Holdgrün, 2015). In sum, it therefore seems that across the different depths of involvement of being a participant, a member and a volunteer, many studies have found such positive correlations.

However, the role of civil society in providing the possibilities to participate, to be a member or to be a volunteer, are arguably different in bigger towns or even cities. Following the change in rural areas from being areas where the inhabitants both live and work – to areas where they to a higher extent primarily live (Wallace et al., 2017) – the role civil society plays has come under pressure and is more unevenly distributed in comparison to earlier. In some instances, the strength of civil society has remained the same – or is perhaps even stronger than before – because in some rural areas there is a cluster of people living with different types of strong competencies and a willingness to contribute to civil society (Egelund & Lausten, 2006), whereas in other areas there are clusters of people living with a weaker background for contributing and/or less willingness to contribute to civil society (Wallace et al., 2017). Such measurements of the strength of civil society are often referred to as the ‘density’ of civil society which is what we will consider next.

### Regarding density of civil society

There is strong anecdotal evidence that the density of civil society is higher in rural areas. As mentioned in the introduction, the strength of civil society is often measured via the coverage of civic associations – which has often been used as a proxy for the strength of civil society (cf. Donaghy, 2013). The findings of whether civil society density is higher in rural areas have been mixed. Some studies (for example, Selle et al., 2019 and Wallace & Pichler, 2009) show a higher density of civil society associations in rural areas. But other studies only find non-significant and therefore inconclusive results (for example, Hooghe & Botterman, 2012). Other studies do also find that density of civil society is reduced when population density increases – but, in sum, no clear pattern emerges with regard to the question of whether density of civil society is higher in rural areas (Baer et al., 2016).

But even though there is no clear conclusion with regard to whether the density of civil society is higher in rural areas than in cities, this does

not alter the interest in assessing what role civil society and the different levels of participating (participating, being a member or being a volunteer) play. Actually, it becomes even more intriguing to try to capture if and how civil society might play a role for the higher levels of quality of life found in rural areas. Therefore, in this section we will pursue the question of whether it is possible to show that participation in civil society might play a role across rural and urban settings, but also what the mechanisms between participation in civil society in rural areas and higher levels of quality of life might be. The first four chapters in the section highlight different types of mechanisms using different types of qualitative methodologies. In [Chapter 13](#) Iversen et al. shed light on how participation of local inhabitants in organised civil society might matter for their quality of life. Melås et al. focus in [Chapter 14](#) on how we can understand what might contribute to rural youths' quality of life growing up in rural areas. Beel and Wallace investigate how cultural heritage might mobilise local civil society, contribute to create social and cultural capital, and thereby add to the quality of life in rural areas. Tandberg and Loga assess what role participation in a voluntary organisation targeting marginalised women in rural areas with low language skills might play for the quality of life for these women. Finally, Eime et al. pursue the question of whether it is possible to trace a difference across rural/regional areas and metropolitan areas on health-related quality of life.

Methodologically, it is a challenge to capture what role civil society might have for quality of life. The chain of causality in some instances might be stretched rather long (and perhaps sometimes too long) as it is difficult to assess *in vivo* what might in the end have the most important influence on subjectively experienced quality of life. The possible links between participation and how participation might influence quality of life is therefore difficult to capture and analyse. Therefore, it is interesting that the chapters in this section in different ways shed methodological light on how it is possible to work with exploring how the possible link between different factors within the realm of civil society and their possible impact on quality of life can be researched and analysed via different methodological approaches. Iversen et al. conduct qualitative interviews to pursue the role organised civil society might play. Melås et al. use both quantitative data and qualitative data to analyse how participation in civil society might influence adolescents' quality of life in rural areas. Beel and Wallace shed light on the role participation in local history organisations and the digitisation of local history content play for individuals by adopting a qualitative methodology. Tandberg and Loga use ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews to assess how participation in voluntary organisations in rural areas by ethnic minority groups with low language

competencies might influence their quality of life. And finally, Eime et al. use quantitative survey data to pursue the question of whether quality of life varies across rural and urban settings.

Theoretically, the different contributions also introduce a number of the different theoretical perspectives which have been utilised in attempts to explain how civil society might influence quality of life. Iversen et al. use social theory, which claims that *identity-bearing* activities in a social context increase self-assessed quality of life and that *self-expression* in a social context matters. Melås et al. apply a social-spatial approach to how civil society might influence quality of life, which is conceptually approached as co-constituted by ‘locality’, ‘ideas about rurality’ and ‘human practice’, which is perceived as analytically rewarding as it bridges three fundamental dimensions. Beel and Wallace use theory focusing on how different types of social and cultural capital might be transmitted via digitisation of historical material and thereby open up new opportunities for cultural participation, which then in the end might influence quality of life. Tandberg and Loga base their study on the capability approach, which focuses on people’s ability to convert resources into opportunities. Finally, Eime et al. take their point of departure in a conceptual model on health-related quality of life.

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## The role of civil society in securing self-assessed quality of life in rural areas

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### Introduction

It has been shown that self-reported quality of life is higher in rural areas than in the city in Denmark (Sørensen, 2018; Lolle & Andersen, 2019), as well as in other national contexts in the global North (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015; Burger et al., 2020; Dijkstra, 2020; Gilbert et al., 2016; Viganò et al., 2019). In this chapter we assess the role participation in civil society might play in rural areas for inhabitants' self-reported quality of life in the global North.

The basis for this chapter is research showing that participation in activities related to civil society does seem to matter for individuals' quality of life. For example, 'membership' in associations has a positive impact on self-reported quality of life (Cutler, 1976, 1982; Helliwell, 2002; Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Wallace & Pichler, 2009; Eime et al., 2010). 'Volunteering' also has a positive impact on self-reported quality of life and happiness (Wheeler et al., 1998; Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Loga, 2010; Tiefenbach & Holdgrüns, 2015; Ibsen et al., 2021). Finally, several studies have shown a correlation between quality of life and 'participation' in cultural, leisure and sports activities, many of which take place in relation to civil society (Snyder et al., 2010; Brajša-Žganec, 2011; Downward & Rasciute, 2011; Gopinath et al., 2012; Becchetti et al., 2012; Young et al., 2013; Wheatley & Bickerton, 2017, 2019).

The starting point is that civil society might play a more important role for individuals' quality of life in rural areas, as civil society is more often an important arena for participation in activities and events in comparison with larger cities, where the number of activities is higher (particularly with a higher number of commercial actors). Hence, civil society might play an important role as the glue that to some extent binds the local community together. In recent decades, however, there have been significant changes in the rural areas of Denmark, which has also highlighted the role

and importance of civil society. Up until the 1950s and 1960s, rural areas were strongly dominated by agriculture and businesses derived from agriculture; most of everyday life (work, school, shopping, leisure, etc.) took place within a relatively limited geographical area; culturally, each rural area was characterised by a great homogeneity; and each rural area had its own decentralised political government (in the last fifty years, the number of municipalities has been reduced from about 1,000 to almost 100). Today rural inhabitants in Denmark are therefore to a lesser extent mutually dependent in the sense that they less frequently work in the local area where they live, often use the nearest towns for shopping as well as leisure and cultural activities, and therefore are to a lesser extent dependent on each other and on the offers and opportunities that business and civil society previously provided (Sørensen, 2014). Such tendencies are seen in other national contexts as well (Wallace et al., 2017; Wuthnow, 2013). Hence, today it is possible to ‘just’ live in rural areas, enjoy nature, commute to work and cultural events in larger cities, and in that sense not be very connected to the local community (Gieling et al., 2019) – particularly in rural areas with no or a weak tradition for being engaged in civil society.

In order to assess the role of civil society in rural areas, the extent to which individuals living in rural areas do seem to be engaged in civil society is initially considered. This is arguably a prerequisite if civil society is to play a role for the individual’s quality of life. What we find are indications that, at least in Denmark, civil society plays a more dominant role for individuals living in rural areas in comparison with individuals living in more urban areas. The volunteers in rural areas spend more hours per month volunteering (CFSA, 2020), the inhabitants on average conduct voluntary efforts in a higher number of associations, and a higher proportion of the rural population are involved in voluntary efforts (Svendsen, 2017). Finally, volunteering efforts in relation to sports facilities in rural areas are more widespread (Forsberg et al., 2017). Similar trends can be seen in other national contexts, such as the USA (Wuthnow, 2013).

But so far, much of the research on the role civil society might play for quality of life has had a quantitative bias (Cieslik, 2021) and has been less focused on how and why the more widespread participation in civil society in rural areas might be able to explain parts of the systematic variation in quality of life between urban and rural areas. It is against this backdrop that this chapter uses a qualitative methodological approach to focus on how and why participation in civil society matters for individuals living in rural areas. Therefore, the research question is: *How do inhabitants in three Danish rural areas assess whether, how and why participation in civil society influences their quality of life?*

The research also shows that the difference between urban areas and rural areas in quality of life is not as big as it is sometimes perceived to be (Lolle & Andersen, 2019; Dijkstra, 2020; Eurofound, 2020) and the connection between participation in civil society and quality of life is not always as strong as the studies mentioned in the section above show (Enroljas, 2015). One study, for example, shows that it is difficult to demonstrate that membership of an association increases quality of life in the Danish setting (Ibsen et al., 2021). Based on these mixed findings, we aim to use this chapter to discuss the role civil society in rural areas might play in quality of life in rural areas.

## Theory

We are particularly inspired by theories set forth by Lim and Putnam (2010) and Stebbins (1996, 2001, 2007). First, Lim and Putnam's findings show that only when people have both a strong sense of religious identity and networks within the religious community does religion enhance life satisfaction. The conclusion is based on an analysis of religious congregations, but Lim and Putnam believe that 'networks based on non-religious social identity have a similar effect as long as the members of these networks meet regularly in a certain context and share a strong sense of identity' (Lim & Putnam, 2010, p. 929).

Second, and unlike Lim and Putnam, Stebbins (1996, 2001, 2007) puts more emphasis on self-expression in social fellowship with others. Stebbins believes that quality of life depends on whether one is involved in 'casual leisure' or in 'serious leisure'. Casual leisure refers to 'immediately intrinsic rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it' (Stebbins, 2001, p. 53). Serious leisure, on the other hand, is defined as 'the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity that captivates its participants with the complexity and many challenges. It is profound, long lasting, and invariably based on substantial skill, knowledge or experience' (Stebbins, 2001, p. 54). Stebbins finds that serious leisure to a greater degree than casual leisure generates rewards for its participants, among them fulfilling one's human potential, expressing one's skills and knowledge, having cherished experiences and developing a valued identity and taking part in the affairs of the group (Stebbins, 2001, p. 54), which together strengthen the individual's quality of life.

In principle, the opportunities to engage in serious leisure are as good in urban areas as in rural areas, especially in terms of the opportunity to pursue an activity as an amateur. But it is the part of serious leisure, which Stebbins calls 'serious volunteering', that contributes to the development of community life or 'public good', which can be assumed to be more

widespread in rural areas. Rational free-rider theory prescribes that ‘serious volunteering’ depends on the size of the community to which the collective good pertains. This is confirmed by studies showing that contributions to a public good dwindle as group size increases (Stahl & Haruvy, 2006; Darley & Latane, 1968).

Inspired by both Lim & Putnam (2010) and Stebbins (1996, 2001, 2007), the theoretical assumption is that the importance of associations for life satisfaction depend on whether citizens are engaged in communities (social networks) which are profound and long lasting. This includes, for example, activities supporting local identity, the history of the local community and ‘destiny’ or the common interest in maintaining, for example, a public school or other public institution, etc. A basic assumption is that individuals in general thrive when they relate to other inhabitants – and that having such connections basically contributes to their experience of having higher levels of quality of life. We further assume that the size of rural communities and the dependence on citizens’ commitment to the ‘common good’ contribute to people engaging in meaningful communities.

### *Methodological considerations*

The research project is based on multi-sited qualitative interviews conducted in three rural areas in Denmark. We selected rural areas with similar characteristics but geographically dispersed to assess the inhabitants’ perception of how civil society might matter for their quality of life in similar geographical settings. Inclusion criteria for the rural areas were that they have approximately 1,000 inhabitants and that they all have public and/or non-public schools, basic sports and cultural facilities and basic shopping possibilities (such as a grocery store). They all have more than thirty minutes of driving to a city with more than 45,000 inhabitants (which includes the eleven largest cities in Denmark). All three rural areas are hence to be considered a rural setting (Erhvervsministeriet, 2020). Finally, the three rural areas are in three different parts of Denmark and for this reason, obviously, also in three different municipalities. As our aim is not to generalise but to find patterns typical to inhabitants in these rural areas, we have used ‘purposeful selection’ (Maxwell, 2013) to ensure that we gain access to knowledge that is relevant to our purpose. However, beside the similarities of the settings, at least one important difference needs to be highlighted. First, even though all rural areas had schools, the types of school were quite different. In one of the rural areas the local municipal primary school had been closed for some years and therefore in this rural area there was no school offer to pupils below 15 years of age. But all three areas have a free residential school, which is a non-profit school, based on civil society ideals,

where children and young people in ninth and tenth grade live and go to school for a year. Few local pupils will attend this type of residential school, which will normally have pupils from different parts of Denmark. About 20 per cent of Danish teenagers attend such a school for one to two years when they are 14–17 years old (Efterskoleforeningen, 2021). Hence, the residential schools in the three rural areas to varying extents provide facilities for the local community.

We used three key persons in each town as ‘gatekeepers’ (such as chairpersons from local sports clubs, manager of the local grocery store or the manager of the local development forum) to get in contact with potential interviewees in the community. Each ‘gatekeeper’ was asked to provide us with a list of ten persons involved in civil society as well as persons involved to a lesser extent. Based on the provided list of contacts we selected twenty-eight interviewees almost equally distributed between the settings. Due to COVID-19 restrictions the interviews were conducted on the phone. Our aim was to sample informants that were very involved as well as those who were less involved in civil society. It was, however, a challenge to get in contact with persons that were less involved in civil society. As a consequence, the more involved are slightly more represented in the sampled interviews.

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured to make sure that they followed the same themes, but simultaneously allowing for the informants to present additional themes that they found important. The structure of the interview guide was first to ask about their perception of quality of life, moving on to questions about the connection between quality of life and living in a rural area and finally narrowing it into questions about their involvement in civil society and how involvement/non-involvement affected their quality of life.

The interviews were conducted by two of the authors in the period from April 2020 to November 2020 and lasted between forty and ninety minutes. Interviews were first transcribed and then analysed using Nvivo. The interviews were read several times to identify patterns that seemed pertinent to the informants independently of settings or individual position. These identified patterns were organised into themes and next the interviews were analysed deductively to deepen the insight according to the themes. The four overarching themes were: What do the interviewees in general say about their quality of life?; How do they relate to their participation in civil society?; How do they relate to their use of local meeting places?; and Has the COVID-19 crisis had any type of influence on how they perceive their quality of life? From the first round of deductive coding, based on the four overarching themes, we inductively developed themes which in different ways highlighted how the interviewees relate their participation in civil society in rural areas to their quality of life. We selected the three most dominant themes which are described in the analysis below.

## Analysis

In this section we summarise our main findings for three overarching themes: (1) making activities possible for other local citizens; (2) contributing to civil society is rewarding for the individual; and (3) it is rewarding to be a part of the struggle for overcoming the challenges of living in rural areas.

### *Theme 1: Making activities possible for other local citizens*

First, civil society plays an important role as an arena for leisure activities, particularly for children, adolescents and youngsters in the rural areas. Several of the interviewed argue that participation in civil society is also a way of contributing to the rural areas being attractive places to live – and hence to be attractive arenas for establishing higher levels of quality of life. But contrary to what you might expect – that to contribute to the possibilities of the local citizens would be seen as a strenuous affair – it is perceived by a clear majority of the interviewees as being personally rewarding to contribute to civil society via, for example, helping the local associations and through such efforts contributing to creating possibilities in the local areas. For example, a younger female stated that

it is important that someone steps up when there is a need for help ... I do not know if I consider what is in it for me, but I like to help if there is a need for help ... it probably gives me the sensation not just to have a laid-back attitude to the rural area I live in, but that I am actually able to get some of the heavier wheels rolling now and then.

(interviewee 1, rural area 2)

It is evident that it is getting involved in creating possibilities in the local community that is of importance. And it does not even have to be activities that you are engaged in yourself. It is acknowledged by several of the interviewees that to be a part of civil society is also about securing widely available activities in rural areas. To be a part of civil society gives the individual a sense of contributing, which seems to be very rewarding to them. For example, one interviewee stressed that being a part of creating possibilities for the local rural area in general is important

because what makes a rural area bloom is that you relate to each other ... that you are a part of civil society, participate and learn to know new people ... people that you would otherwise not meet ... that is very important ... because what makes it possible, that you meet across different contexts, is the different parts of civil society. But myself, I do not thrive with having to participate every Thursday at 7pm – so I have to find other ways to get my exercise ... but what I do like is to contribute by helping out with arranging different events in the rural area through being engaged in the local association.

(interviewee 1, rural area 3)



A middle-aged male also reflects on how it is to have the experience that others rely on you making a difference via your participation in local associations,

because no matter if you like it or not, some people need you, and we do like that someone is somewhat dependent on us. One thing that gives us satisfaction is that someone really needs you and is willing to listen to what you have to say. So, of course this gives you an improved quality of life that you have a position in society and that I do make a difference ... that obviously gives quality of life ... no doubt about that.

(interviewee 8, rural area 3)

Hence, it is creating possibilities for others that seems to be of particular importance for the interviewees. This seems to indicate that it is particularly when you are involved in meaningful activities in the longer run (serious leisure), not only immediate activities (casual leisure), that the longer-term commitments between individuals might develop and translate into influencing individuals' quality of life.

*Theme 2: Contributing to civil society is rewarding  
for the individual*

According to theme 1, the interviewees stress that being involved in planning and executing civil society activities is rewarding because it is a way to make sure that others might benefit from participating in such activities. But as we show below, to participate in civil society is also perceived as being individually rewarding because participating in civil society provides the opportunity to establish and maintain long-lasting relationships with other locals.

For example, a person stresses how relating to other persons in civil society contributes to her quality of life:

it is satisfactory to be able to help the different associations ... you do get something back by meeting all those people ... and when you have taken part in a board meeting, plan and execute events or programmes, and then meet the other board members later and agree on ... we managed to do this ... it is very satisfactory to be able to say, that we have been a part of this ... it is important for my quality of life not only to enjoy but also to contribute. I like that.

(interviewee 1, rural area 1)

What these interviews share is the notion that it is the combination of being a part of joint efforts and to be able to say that you have contributed to these efforts that might contribute to a shared and local identity. To have such a shared identity seems likely to translate into higher levels of quality of life as a shared identity is highlighted by many of the interviewees as something that is important and beneficial to them personally. For example, a person in his sixties who has volunteered all his life stresses that

it is a giant satisfaction to do something together with others ... and to do something that you are not paid to do ... the biggest part of the satisfaction is that you do this voluntarily, that you are not dependent on someone else having to pay ... but instead that you give something to the community and then you get something back ... that is the motivating force.

(interviewee 5, rural area 2)

What we find is, therefore, first, that it is not the immediate joy of being a part of activities themselves that is in focus when individuals reflect on how participation in civil society matters for them. Rather, it seems to be in the longer run being a part of civil society and relating to other locals that appear to be experienced as rewarding.

*Theme 3: It is rewarding to be a part of the struggle for overcoming the challenges of living in rural areas*

What cuts across the engagement in civil society for many of the interviewees, besides that it is seen as personally rewarding to be a part of civil society, is also a perception of necessity in their engagement in local civil society. That is, that it is a struggle to keep rural areas alive, which is illustrated by the following quote by a middle-aged male:

if no one out here volunteers, then nothing happens. There will be no scouts, no sports association ... we are a small town but we have a swimming pool, a sports hall and fitness facilities. Many of those things would not have been here if volunteers had not said, we want this, we will do this, that is quality of life for us, that we have got that in our area ... in larger cities ... such things come automatically. But here – if someone wants something to happen within for example music or volleyball ... then they have to do something themselves

(interviewee 9, rural area 1)

On one hand, the quotes illustrate that struggling is about just that – struggling despite a general development which challenges life in rural areas due to centralisation and the rural exodus (Gieling et al., 2019). But as the quotes also illustrate, it is experienced as rewarding to overcome (some of) the challenges of living in rural areas together. Hence, the interviewees sometimes feel obliged to contribute, because if no one steps up, then nothing happens.

To underline this point, a young female stresses the importance of contributing to the local rural community; when asked about whether she primarily contributes because it is needed or because it is a duty, she states that

it is somewhat of a duty ... because otherwise I am afraid that there will be no volunteering, no cinema or no sports hall, but it is not a boring duty ... I see it more as a part of living in this rural area ... I want these possibilities to be available for me and my neighbours. So, it is not a boring duty ... but it is like ... I just know that it is necessary that we also participate.

(interviewee 1, rural area 2)

Even though it is not a ‘boring duty’, it is acknowledged that closure of meeting places makes the struggle harder. The most evident finding in relation to the importance of meeting places is the closure of the school in rural area 2. When the school closed, it became much more difficult for the local sports club to create activities for local kids and adolescents. A local male coach concludes:

after the school closed, almost all the younger players are gone ... which is natural ... you want to play soccer with those you also attend school with. So of course, you go directly from school to the local sports facility ... so now the kids and adolescents play soccer where they attend school.

(interviewee 6, rural area 2)

The importance of having a local school for children below 15 years of age is also something that turns up in interviews from rural area 1 (interviewee 6) and in rural area 3 (interviewee 8). Therefore, local meeting places (such as a local school) seem to be important for civil society to provide activities in rural areas.

In sum, it is perceived as rewarding that your efforts are needed, and that your efforts are necessary as a part of the struggle to keep possibilities open in that rural area is contributing to the quality of life of individuals.

### *The role of age across the different themes*

Even though the interviewees share many perspectives on how civil society contributes to their quality of life, nuances do occur across age. Hence, the younger persons interviewed to a lesser extent than the other age groups highlight how contributing to overcoming the struggle and creating good possibilities for other age groups is rewarding. Instead, the younger persons participate in associations to get a rich social life with friends. For them, participation in civil society is to a greater extent than for the other age groups mostly about meeting like-minded people and having civil society as an arena for their social life. These findings are in line with other studies which have also shown that younger persons to a greater extent get involved in voluntary efforts because of its advantages for them in relation to, for example, their future career, whereas older persons more often are involved for more altruistic reasons (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2016; Ronkainen et al., 2020). Just as it is in the case in other rural areas, several of the youngsters interviewed are on their way to move away from the rural areas to get an education, which is known to have a strong impact on staying intentions (Dufhues et al., 2021; Glendinning et al., 2003). Several of the youngsters interviewed were planning to move away for educational purposes, which also seemed to affect the role they ascribed to their participation in local

civil society, where they to a lesser extent than the older age groups stressed the qualities of participating in civil society in the longer run.

## Discussion

To sum up, our findings suggest that for the interviewees it is being deeply involved in the local civil society that is rewarding and which seems to contribute to their quality of life. The combination of planning and executing activities together and overcoming (some of) the struggles involved with living in a rural area, such as having limited access to human, political and economic resources, seems to be particularly important for civil society's contribution to quality of life in rural areas. Hence, it is not the immediate activities themselves ('casual leisure'), but rather the longer-lasting character of being involved in 'serious leisure' activities which seems to be of importance in supporting higher levels of quality of life.

However, it is important to consider if the constructive force of the 'struggle' with regard to its possible contribution to quality of life might have its limits. For example, the closure of the school in rural area 2 has made the 'struggle' more strenuous as the children instead take part in activities where they attend school. Other research on the consequences of school closures in Danish rural areas showed similar tendencies (Svendson & Sørensen, 2016; Sørensen et al., 2021), but also that how dire the consequences are for the local community depends on how much human capital is present leading up to the school closure. In areas with higher levels of human capital, the consequences are arguably less dire than in rural areas with lower levels of human capital (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006). We have not considered how a different composition of the inhabitants across the three rural areas might influence the extent to which they will be able to overcome 'struggles'. But our material indicates that participating in local civil society seems to be linked to higher levels of quality of life at least for those participating. As school closures seem to weaken the possibilities for local civil society to be well functioning, school closures have the potential to result in lower levels of quality of life in rural areas for those individuals for whom civil society is of importance. We therefore argue that decisions on school closures, and closures of other types of institutions and meetings places which support civil society, should take into consideration the possible negative impact such closures might have in the longer run on quality of life. Even though our study has shown that it positively influences quality of life to be a part of the 'struggle', we find it relevant to consider that a balance between a 'constructive struggle' and a more 'destructive struggle' might exist, where it becomes too hard to fight against the overall demographic and structural

developments. In such cases of too hard a struggle, ‘volunteer burnout’ (Wilson et al., 2016) and other types of negative consequences for the volunteers might be the result.

Immediately one might think that it seems to be a challenge for quality of life that a number of the interviewees note that they have to do ‘something’ – if they do not do something themselves and contribute to civil society, then nothing will happen. On the one hand, it is in line with the ‘free-rider’ theory that assumes that people’s contribution to public good – here in the form of a civil society commitment – is greater in smaller communities and groups than in larger ones. On the other hand, such a ‘necessary’ commitment may be perceived as less free and more forced than one normally associates with a commitment to civil society. And this immediately seems to run counter to the studies showing that the feeling of individual freedom results in higher levels of self-assessed quality of life (see, for example, Ferriss, 2002; Inglehart, 2010; Lolle & Andersen, 2019; Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). But based on our findings, it seems to be exactly the notion that others depend on you that seems to be a part of why people spend time and effort in civil society in rural areas. This seems to be in line with the theoretical premise – that it is participation in ‘serious leisure’, understood as the longer-term commitment in civil society, that led to a shared identity being created. And this might be a central difference between rural and more urban areas – that the perception of necessity is stronger in rural areas, and that – contrary to what you might immediately think – the perception of increased necessity contributes to individuals’ quality of life via creating a stronger sense of joint identity locally. And according to Lim & Putnam’s (2010) findings, a strong identity contributes to higher levels of quality of life. Other research has shown that rural residents develop more affective links and value their localities more than their urban counterparts. Hence, both rural and urban residents identify themselves with their local place identity. But inhabitants from rural areas develop an attachment to their local community, and to a greater extent form membership pride and positive evaluation of their local rural setting (Belanche et al., 2021). Our research immediately seems to confirm that rural dwellers do have a strong attachment to their local community via their participation in civil society activities and that this seems to be part of the reason that they feel that civil society contributes to their quality of life.

Finally, it is interesting to note that what seems to result in increased levels of quality of life is participation in ‘serious leisure’ activities. This finding seems to run counter to the widespread idea that the motives for volunteering have undergone a major change from ‘collective’ volunteering towards a more ‘reflexive’ type of volunteering, according to which the motives to volunteer have shifted from a ‘collective identity’ to ‘self-identity’, from ‘subordination to collective goals’ to ‘biographical match’, and from

‘obvious sense of duty or responsibility to community’ to ‘self-centered motivation’ (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). According to our findings, the motivations connected to ‘collective volunteering’ seem to be more pertinent in our material, as the motives connected to ‘collective volunteering’ seem to be linked to two of the three mechanisms leading to increased levels of quality of life, namely ‘Theme 1: Making activities possible for other local citizens’ and ‘Theme 3: It is rewarding to be a part of the struggle for overcoming the challenges of living in rural areas’, which are ‘collective’ rather than ‘reflexive’. Even though the other mechanism, ‘Theme 2: Contributing to civil society is rewarding for the individual’, seems to be more ‘reflexive’, the overall picture is that if you want to understand how it might be possible to support more individuals in attaining higher levels of quality of life in rural areas, one should focus particularly on how individuals might be motivated to consider getting involved in ‘collective volunteering’, as this type of volunteering seems to be a main driver behind the mechanisms resulting in higher levels of quality of life.

## Conclusion

We have shown whether, how and why participation in civil society influences inhabitants’ quality of life in three rural areas in Denmark. It should be acknowledged that the conclusions are valid in settings which share similarities with the settings in the study, that is, in settings of a similar size and geographical location and in a nation-state type which share similarities with Denmark such as other Northern European countries. With this limitation in mind, it is shown in the chapter that it is being engaged in ‘serious leisure’ activities in a manner that seems to build up a strong joint identity which positively influence quality of life via three different types of mechanisms, which we have presented under the following three themes: *Theme 1: Making activities possible for other local citizens*, *Theme 2: Contributing to civil society is rewarding for the individual* and *Theme 3: It is rewarding to be a part of the struggle for overcoming the challenges of living in rural areas*.

It seems likely that particularly under theme 1 and theme 3 that findings seem to be distinct for rural areas, whereas findings for theme 2 seem to be likely to also be found in more urban settings. Hence, it is a limitation to the study that we have not compared how inhabitants in more urban settings experience how their participation in civil society might matter for their quality of life. Larger empirical studies could test whether such differences can be confirmed across settings with a different degree of urbanity. Future studies could, for example, delve further into how and why participation in civil society might differently influence quality of life in urban and rural settings.

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## Rural youth: quality of life, civil participation and outlooks for a rural future

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### Introduction

As addressed by the other chapters in this section, the relationship between ‘civil society’ and ‘rural quality of life’ is complex. We analyse the quality of life and civil participation of Norwegian rural youth in the context of ageing rural demographics and the consequential shrinking rural populations, which is an overall European trend in the peripheries (Bock, 2016). In Norway, this trend is expected to continue (Leknes & Løkken, 2020) and create uneven futures in terms of access to public welfare and income/occupation opportunities (Frisvoll, 2020; NOU, 2020a, 2020b). In the rural periphery, public service provision is scaled back, centralised to regional centres, partly as a public sector response to future outlooks of shrinking public revenue and increasing public costs, and partly because of a demography with fewer children and young adults. While welfare services and work opportunities are important to people’s general well-being (and desire to stay), so is their *perception* of their material and social environments.

In this chapter we explore what rural young people focus on when describing what contributes to their quality of life, how rural youth’s participation in civil society differs from urban youth and rural adults, and more importantly, what enables/restricts civil society participation for young people across different rural contexts. We address this by (1) providing a relevant theoretical framework; (2) presenting updated insights into rural youth’s assessments of place qualities and aspects of quality of life and civil participation combined with existing literature on rural youth; and (3) discussing these insights in light of overall demographic and technological trends driving an increased diversity of geographic situations in rural Norway, and its possible effects on future quality of life in rural areas.

### Background

Despite an active regional policy in Norway, the rural population has been shrinking for decades, a thinning accompanied by a reorganisation of

services from outskirts to regional centres. Moreover, the anticipated demographic development implies a decline in the rural workforce (NOU, 2020a). Although the rural periphery is struggling measured in population figures, the periphery's role in Norway's economy is substantial, with regions outside Norway's capital region dominating the per capita contribution to export revenue. Many regions in the periphery have a very low unemployment rate, and a key challenge is a lack of qualified and able workers (NOU, 2020a). Addressing these challenges has resulted in rural and regional Norway relying on international labour migration (cf. Rye & Slettebakk, 2020; Rye, 2018). The demographic outlook of an ageing population predicts an increased future labour need in the welfare services and possibly an increase in national competition for qualified personnel, likely amplifying the labour shortage in the peripheries (Frisvoll, 2020; NOU, 2020b), with a potential spill-over effect on service quality and life quality. A recent expert review argued that the future ambition of regional policy should be shifted towards goals more easily achieved for sustaining life quality, rather than sustaining population size (NOU, 2020b).

Demographic composition and demographic trends tie directly and indirectly to quality of life as they change material and social structures. For instance, the evacuation of services and social meeting spaces may be met by increased effort from civil society, as indicated by Blekesaune and Haugen's (2018) finding of increased participation of voluntary activities by elders in rural communities compared to urban communities. Similarly, research by Haugen and Logstein (2016) on the civil sector's role in the care for elders in rural municipalities in the periphery found that elders were volunteering to care for other elders. At least for the elder population this strategy seems to pay off, as elder people in rural communities report greater satisfaction with health and care services and a greater sense of connectedness with their community, than elder people in urban communities (Blekesaune & Haugen, 2018). Can we expect a similar turn to the civil sector for rural youth? Would this result in the same beneficial effect of greater connectedness with their local community, when we know that Norwegian youth are less involved in the civil sector and formalised voluntary activities than adults (cf. Fladmoe et al., 2018)?

### *Rural communities and quality of life*

What constitutes quality of life is subjective. What thrills one person, puts another one off. Introducing a fuzzy concept, such as rurality, into the mix makes the challenge complete. What constitutes quality of life in rural communities, and what aspects of rurality undermine or support quality of life? In bridging the concepts of rural communities, quality of life and civil society, we need to look at whether rural communities could be suitable

arenas for civil participation, social support, sense of belonging and safety, and other aspects typically associated with quality of life, and we need to address what *rural* is.

A central starting point in discussing rural communities is the different forms of social associations that occur in society, described by Tönnies (2001 [1887]). *Gesellschaft* denotes the ideal type for modern and urban society, which is characterised by individuality. Here relations are planned, chosen and targeted and take place through trade and agreed contracts. *Gemeinschaft*, the ideal of a rural society, is characterised by an organic community and is an expression of more traditional forms of society, with strong social ties and dependencies between individuals (Tönnies, 2001 [1887]). The use of these archetypes seem often to lead down the path of essentialism, idealisation of ‘rural’ and an oversimplified dichotomisation between urban and rural social qualities (Halfacree, 1993; Woods, 2005). However, it is the balance between these two inverse archetypal types of relations, and that these vary between societies, that is the point (Tönnies, 2001 [1887]), as they are deployed as social representations of rural and urban qualities (cf. Halfacree, 2007).

There is a lack of consensus in the research literature as to what quality of life entails as it comprises a variety of different factors. Matarrita-Cassante (2010) held that quality of life is an objective and subjective assessment of the human life situation. One operationalisation of a subjective assessment of quality of life is that it is a mix of *perceived* material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, community and emotional well-being (Cummins, 1997). D’Agostini and Fantini (2008) understand quality of life as not just living conditions, but as a property of the community. Strong community attachment and social ties in a community correlate with a higher level of well-being (Theodori, 2001; Lim & Putnam, 2010; Farstad & Zahl-Thanem, 2021), and appreciation of friendly and helpful neighbours relates to a higher degree of community satisfaction (Auh & Cook, 2009). As previous research shows (cf. Wallace & Pichler, 2009), there is a well-proven link between quality of life and civil participation. In this respect, youth may have arenas and ways of participating that differ from older people, and which may differ between urban and rural contexts. Hence, we apply a broad understanding of civil participation, as encompassing the social activities in a community, which happen independently of the state and the market. We seek to better understand how rural youth participate in their community, and how such participation affects rural youths’ quality of life.

Wilkinson (1991) held that the community, and civil participation in the social arenas in the community, are important for individuals’ well-being. However, fewer people and geographical distances in combination with scarcity of jobs, events and other services in rural areas may possibly impede

overall community satisfaction and in turn quality of life. Wilkinson stated that community development focusing on interactional qualities within the community is necessary in order to overcome these difficulties (Wilkinson, 1991). Wallace and Pichler (2009) found indications that individual participation in civil society makes people happier, and they connected this to access to friends, networks and jobs and a feeling of giving back or committing to something. However, their notion of civil participation is restricted to association participation, namely system integration, which excludes unorganised forms of participation called social integration, which refers to informal networks and the sense of belonging (Wallace et al., 2017). Putnam (2000) included this in his definition, but he did not take participation through the Internet and social media into account. Johansen and Fisker (2020) found that social media does not alter how interaction in rural communities unfolds but rather that it is being used in the same manner as other technological configurations already in place. Wallace et al. (2017) showed that online communication could be a tool for creating social cohesion and this also allows connecting the community as a whole to the world outside it, making decentralised jobs possible.

Drawing on these insights, our understanding of the complexity of rural youth's quality of life depends on a wide set of factors ranging from the availability of work and housing to social integration in the community. These factors are affected by the broader demographic problem described in the introduction. All aspects of rural life are influenced by the decline of population in rural areas, and the question of how rural youth's perceived quality of life sits in this context is crucial, not just for maintaining lively rural communities for the residents' sake, but also for upholding a decentralised population with all the benefits that brings.

### *Rural youth in research in Norway*

In a literature review on rural youth in Norway, Rye (2019) found that there has been little research on this topic recently, and that the main focus on urban areas is also reflected in international academia. What we do know is that rural young people do not constitute a uniform group, and that the similarities between urban and rural youth are greater than the differences (Rye, 2019; Bakken, 2020). One study found that there are almost no differences between urban and rural youth when it comes to participation in organised activities, social digital activities and hanging out with friends (Eriksen & Andersen, 2021). What this study did not capture is how different forms of interactions, services and relations – other aspects of civil society – play out in the local environment. Frøyland (2011) showed that youth do not want to participate more and take more responsibility in organising their leisure

activities, and that the faith in the collective influence is greater than their own ability to impact their own livelihoods. Moreover, as youth have trust in these arenas, there are opportunities for expanding youths' participation, but the lack of faith in their own ability to impact needs to be taken seriously. This also extends to the broader understanding of civil society and participation regarding how youth take part in their local environment.

### *Method and data*

We present empirical material from two different sources, applying mixed methods to strengthen the empirical basis and substantiate the findings (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The data was not collected with civil participation in mind but is able to shed light on key aspects of quality of life among rural youth in Norway. The empirical analyses are based on new qualitative data from a Youth Panel (ten young people from different parts of Norway selected to advise the Norwegian government on future rural policy), together with Ruralis's Norwegian Local Communities survey (NLCS) from 2016.

In the common political platform of the coalition government in 2019, it was decided that a youth panel would be set up to advise the government on various issues regarding future regional policy. The Youth's District Panel (hereafter Youth Panel) consists of ten young people, one from each county. Although only ten persons make up the panel, the panel work received broad input through interviews with young people in rural Norway. The insights gathered from all over the country resulted in a report about what challenges and opportunities young people perceive by living less centrally (Melås, 2020). The material ranges from short statements from rural young people on social media platforms to quite short semi-structured interviews. The authors did not participate in this data collection, but the material from these sources was organised, coded and analysed by one of the authors (Melås).

The NLCS is a national survey developed and managed by Ruralis – Institute for Rural and Regional Research.<sup>1</sup> This survey is designed to gather information about living conditions, local identity, social relationships, values and attitudes among rural and urban residents in Norway. The latest survey was conducted in 2016. Seven thousand Norwegians aged 18 years and above were drawn randomly from Norway's Central Population Register. To ensure an equal distribution between people living in rural and urban areas, questionnaires were sent to 3,500 (randomly selected) inhabitants in rural municipalities and 3,500 in urban municipalities. As the sample is stratified, we have weighted the two samples to obtain one representative national

1 <https://ruralis.no/en/>

**Table 14.1** Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

	Norwegian Local Community Survey 2016	Norway: Statistics Norway 2016 (SSB, 2021)
Gender: Women	54	50
Gender: Men	46	50
Age group: 18–39	24	29
Age group 40–59	37	27
Age group 60+	39	22
Higher education	48	33
Region: North Norway	10	9
Region: Mid-Norway	12	9
Region: Western Norway	21	26
Region: Eastern Norway	52	50
Region: Southern Norway	6	6

sample when comparing urban and rural respondents. The 2016 survey has an overall response rate of 30.2 per cent. Most of the analyses based on NLCS in this chapter include only the youngest age category, 18–29 years age, which includes 231 respondents. The remaining analysis includes the rural sample (1,093 respondents). In [Table 14.1](#), sociodemographic characteristics of the sample is compared to population data. Women are a bit overrepresented in NLCS. There is varying deviation in the age groups, while the difference is smallest for the youngest – and in our case, most relevant – age category. Individuals with higher education are somewhat overrepresented in this survey (NLCS: 48 per cent, population: 33 per cent), like in many others. The regional distribution of responses corresponds quite well to the population data. For further survey information, see [Farstad \(2016\)](#); [Zahl-Thanem and Haugen \(2019\)](#).

While the population is becoming increasingly diverse in many rural areas,<sup>2</sup> NLCS does not measure respondents' ethnicity and, hence, we have not been able to facilitate specific analyses of quality of life and ethnic minorities.

2 For example, the share of non-western immigrants has increased correspondingly in rural and urban areas from 2009 ([Kampevoll & Martinussen, 2018](#)).



## Rural youth's civil participation and quality of life

Below we present and discuss the findings from our analysis of the empirical material in light of previous research and theory on civil participation, quality of life and rural sociology. Based on previous research on connected topics and our empirical findings, we structure the following section along two interrelated aspects that are important for understanding what characterises rural youth's civil participation, namely *sociality and proximity* and *perceptions of the rural*. Further, we discuss what is restricting/stimulating the formation of rural youth's civil participation in different rural contexts.

### *Sociality and proximity*

The sense of safety that some experience, in that 'everyone knows everyone' in a local community, can be overshadowed in others' perceptions of the same social transparency as involving pressure towards conformity and difficulty of escaping a bad reputation (Rye, 2006; Farstad & Zahl-Thanem, 2021). Some appreciate that in smaller communities they have a greater chance of being able to influence local decisions, while others look to urban areas in search of like-minded people and larger milieus (Melås, 2020). Sørli et al. (2012) found that aspects of the social community and a sense of belonging/place-identity are among the reasons why people stay in rural areas. Pointing in the same direction, Farstad and Zahl-Thanem (2021) found that social transparency contributed positively to the desire to stay on in one's local community. Furthermore, Burger et al. (2020) showed that community attachment contributes to explaining why people in rural areas score higher on happiness measurements than people living in urban areas. 'Sense of community' affects feelings of loneliness and consequently quality of life for youth, and higher levels of neighbourhood activities are associated with lower levels of loneliness (Chipuer et al., 2003). This, and the advantages of *Gemeinschaft*, are clearly articulated in the Youth Panel data, too:

You know where everyone lives, which people live in the village and where they work. In our small villages in Nordland<sup>3</sup> there is proximity. I can run to the neighbour if I have to borrow something and am not afraid to ride with someone who will give me a lift. In Oslo and the other big cities, you can't do that. It is not socially acceptable to say hello to strangers on the street or give them a little smile. And one should not try to think about going to the neighbour if you have any questions or need something!

(young rural resident 1)

3 County in the northern part of Norway.

This illustrates how the local community is considered by some as a safe and helpful environment, and that rural communities are considered social, cooperative and convivial. This was also supported by the NLCS where we find that among rural youth (young adults, 18–29 years old), 50 per cent talk to their neighbours, compared to only 22 per cent of the urban youth of the same age.<sup>4</sup> About 48 per cent of rural youth say that they participated multiple times in arranging social events for the residents in their own community during the previous five years, compared to 28 per cent of urban youth.<sup>5</sup> On the question of whether they feel a strong fellowship with their local community, 45 per cent of rural youth say yes, compared to 27 per cent of urban youth.<sup>6</sup> Also, Bakken (2020) found that rural youth regard their own local community as safer than youth in urban areas do and that they have greater trust in their community. All these factors are linked to the accepted claim that community factors are important for individual well-being. This shows that sociality among young people in rural communities is distinctly different from its urban counterpart, at least in some respects. Arguably, this indicates that the social aspects of rural communities facilitate a stimulating factor for youth's participation in civil society, both organised and unorganised.

However, there are also other voices in the Youth Panel data, pointing to negative aspects with the rural in terms of social life. One example is this quote, focusing on physical distance as a barrier for social life:

I find it more social to live in the city than in the countryside, as the way is short to be able to meet and 'hang out' without having to invite people to your home. These are the simple aspects of why people go to the city, but of course you have reasons such as job and education as well.

(young rural resident 2)

This partly expresses what Farrugia (2016) called the mobility imperative. Many rural young people want to take part in the material and social benefits that urban areas can provide. Farrugia claimed that 'rural young people's lives can therefore no longer be located purely in one place, but are trans-local, or constructed through economic, symbolic and affective relationships between the multiple spaces through which they move' (Farrugia, 2016, p. 848). The published Youth Survey (Bakken, 2020) showed that Norwegian urban youth think – not surprisingly – that their public transport services are much better than rural youth do. This also addresses Wilkinson's (1991) point that some rural communities may face

4 N=229. Chi-Square = 12.902, df = 1, p. 0.000.

5 N=231. Chi-Square = 5.657, df = 1, p, 0.017.

6 N=231. Chi-Square = 4.948, df = 1, p, 0.026.

social difficulties due to distance and dispersed settlements. Bakken (2020) also found that rural youth are less happy with their local community than urban youth. A specific concern is providing arenas for youth culture to emerge and flourish. Even though the rural community is characterised by high integration, this in some cases cuts across generational divides, as addressed in the Youth Panel data: ‘Where we live, there is no place where young people can meet most days. We have one afternoon activity provision, but this closes early and is open two days. There are no places in our town where young people can be just young people’ (young rural resident 3).

The generational divide is also apparent when it comes to degree of civil participation. When comparing responses in NLCS among youth (18–29 years) and adults (30+) in rural areas regarding their participation in civil society, we find that adults are more engaged in organised local community events (63 per cent of adults, compared to 47 per cent of youth<sup>7</sup>). Whether this is just a sign of an age-dependent changing mentality, a symptom of a withering rural civil society, or a representation of normal generational differences, is debatable. In a national study, youth (age 16–24) engage less than the adult population (age 25–60) in voluntary work (Fladmoe et al., 2018). According to Wollebæk et al. (2000), youth differ from earlier generations by focusing on the activity, and that the motivation is oriented more towards results and individualistic motives rather than the collective benefits. Since youth are less connected to their local community than the older population, they are presumably also more concerned with the relations of the others participating in organisations (Aars et al., 2011). When it comes to performing informal services among fellow residents, we find in our material (NLCS) no statistically significant differences between youth and adults. However, rural youth are generally participating more in the community than urban youth when it comes to holding events (as already shown) and helping out neighbours (18 per cent of rural youth report having helped most or many of their neighbours, compared to 5 per cent of urban youth<sup>8</sup>).

While many rural young people take pride in their rural upbringing and express affection and affiliation towards their homeplace (Melås, 2020), the disadvantages of not being close to ‘where everything happens’ are evident in the Youth Panel data: ‘In rural Norway, it’s a problem to visit a friend whenever you want, or go to the cinema, because you are dependent on public transport or parents offering a lift’ (young rural resident 4). However, COVID-19 has dramatically increased the extent of digital events and

7 N=1073. Chi-Square = 10.793, df = 1, p. 0.001.

8 N=229. Chi-Square = 7.160, df = 1, p. 0.007.

meetings for everyone, making geographical location potentially less crucial to some forms of social activities and civil participation. New digital innovations could possibly be sourced to both solve the challenges of distance and glue young people socially together by the very act of combating distance. For instance, organised carpooling through social media could potentially create new social relations in a digital setting that creates new possibilities for social life in the physical realm.

Generally, youth's perspectives on a further digitalisation of the countryside are overwhelmingly positive in the Youth Panel data (Melås, 2020). Digital tools as a means to decentralise workplaces are considered part of the solution for counterbalancing or compensating for the consequences of urbanisation. Rural youth wish for more decentralised workspaces, home office opportunities and shared work communities (Melås, 2020). Central to the assessment of quality of life is also the quality of welfare services (or lack thereof), which the young people in the data material consider could also to some extent be handled by digital tools. Some informants mention lack of proper school health services and an easily accessible school nurse as an issue and point towards digital possibilities. What this shows is that digitalisation is considered to potentially be a positive contribution in handling the geographical challenges of rural communities: 'Digitisation may ease the situation for commuters; the opportunity to use home office part of the working time. Being able to communicate with others without having to travel long distances is beneficial for both the rural population and the environment' (young rural resident 5).

### *Perceptions of the rural*

The insights from the Youth Panel paint a picture of Norwegian rural youth being torn between what is presented as the *rural idyll* and the exciting and *modern* lifestyle of the city. What in one context, or among one group, is considered positive, can in other contexts, or among other groups, be perceived as negative. Many say they want to start a family in their rural home place due to a sense of place-identity, belonging and well-being, but at the same time there are some who consider it unlikely that they will find a relevant job after graduating. Many see the rural life as poorer in the form of lack of events, meeting places and interesting career paths (Melås, 2020).

This relates to the representation of urbanity as defining youth culture and thus core to cultural status and modern youth identities (Farrugia, 2016). Fewer meeting places combined with a lack of public transport are seen as a weakness for rural communities and some of the informants in the Youth Panel data say this potentially makes it less likely they would settle there. The following quote is characteristic: 'By living in the countryside,

you are somehow outside the progress that is happening in the rest of the world and in the cities, the peripheries often lag a little behind.’ Others stress the importance of a sense of belonging to a community. What this uncovers is a significant duality and ambivalence in the representation of the rural as being both peaceful and safe, while also boring and limiting for their aspirations, and a mix of both push and pull factors. This has also been documented by many earlier studies (cf. Rye, 2006; Haugen & Villa, 2008). There is reason to believe that the factors emphasised change according to phases of life (see, for instance, Villa, 2000), which will also affect the properties in perceived quality of life, as each life phase has different properties.

One take on this notion is the perception that rural communities are typically communities where residents join together and help each other out by doing voluntary work and through holding community events (*Gemeinschaft*). As shown, this understanding of the rural finds some support in the NLCS, where we see that rural youth participate more than their urban counterparts, and on the same level as older rural people. Rural youth also classify their local community as having widespread voluntarism, or strong *dugnadsånd*<sup>9</sup> to a higher degree than urban youth (44 per cent of rural youth versus 19 per cent of urban youth<sup>10</sup>). Another aspect is how the rural context, with smaller local communities, allows for greater impact and reward for participation. One of the informants in the Youth Panel data explains that it is easier to influence decisions in rural communities due to fewer people, tighter relations and familiarity with fellow inhabitants.

### Moving beyond dichotomies: a socio-spatial approach to quality of life

The contextual backdrop of a diminishing and ageing countryside, followed by a slow, but steady withering of the periphery’s infrastructure such as higher education, jobs with high education requirements, opportunities and ‘modernisation’ of youth’s cultural preferences, portrays a pessimistic rural future. Efforts to improve rural quality of life must begin with a realistic framing of current and future actualities, which is, as we have seen, rather dire. This could be done by addressing the different *dimensions* of rural communities and how these relate to the prospects of a vibrant civil society. Arguably, quality of life in rural communities could be understood with a threefold architecture in mind – a material dimension, a social dimension and a representational

9 ‘Dugnad’ is voluntary work, -‘ånd’ is spirit or attitude.

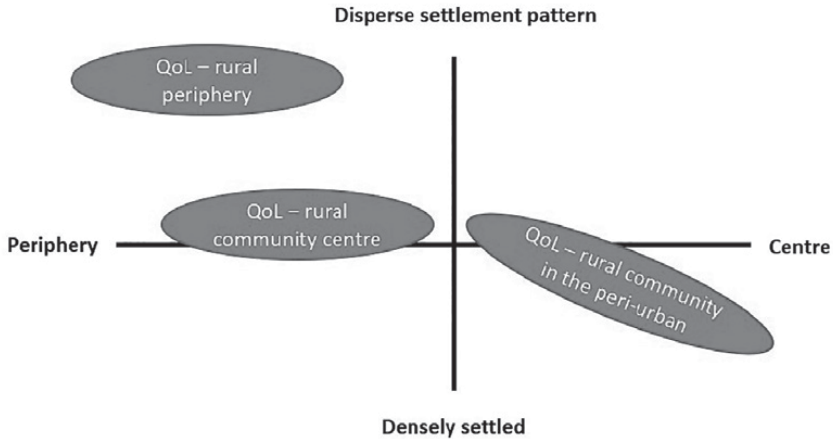
10 N=228. Chi-Square = 11.542, df = 1, p. 0.001.

dimension – and where these dimensions, in isolation and a trialectic manner, constitute, support and undermine quality of life in rural communities (Halfacree, 2006, 2007). Seeing rural as a trialectic socio-spatial emergence in which rurality is conceptually approached as co-constituted by ‘locality’, ‘ideas about rurality’ and ‘human practice’, is analytically rewarding as it bridges three fundamental dimensions (Cloke, 2006; Frisvoll, 2012).

The material dimension of rurality directs analytical attention to the material aspects of quality of life such as geographical distance, settlement pattern and how this affects social interaction in the local community, job opportunities and access to public and private services. The representational dimension not only acknowledges analytical attention to the social representations of rural and the cultural stereotypes and how they are perceived by rural youth, but also towards how quality of life in rural communities is addressed in formal planning documents and authorities’ policies. The social dimension focuses analytically on the social interactions and relations within the local community, voluntary work and services among friends and fellow residents, and actions and inactions of the people entangled in (uneven) power (Frisvoll, 2012). A key aspect with the trialectic conceptual understanding of rural is that the three dimensions mutually influence each other. For instance, distance and sociality are arguably non-complementary. What constitutes, and what undermines, quality of life varies across different socio-spatial contexts.

In Figure 14.1 we have placed three archetypical rural quality of life contexts across two dimensions belonging to the trialectic understanding’s material dimension: distance to geographical centre and settlement pattern. Arguably, these two material dimensions are particularly fundamental in terms of quality of life in rural communities as they constitute the frames of possibilities for the civil sector. The horizontal axis, centre-periphery, is important in numerous ways. First, the demographic issues previously described have a clear correlation to centrality. The population constituting a rural community has higher mean age towards the extreme periphery than towards the extreme centre. Also, public transport varies across this geographical axis. Towards the extreme periphery public transport is poor, compared to that of the juxtaposing geographical extreme in Figure 14.1.

In terms of youth, the dimensions in Figure 14.1 constitute different contexts for the aspects referred to by the triad’s social dimension: towards the extreme periphery the number of young people in a community is fewer than towards the extreme centre. The likelihood of having someone to interact with that shares your interests and values is perhaps higher towards the extreme centre than the extreme periphery. Social transparency and the social relations in societies closer to the archetypical *Gemeinschaft*- rather than the *Gesellschaft*-like communities towards the extreme geographical



**Figure 14.1** Three geographical archetypal rural quality of life contexts in Norway.

centre seem to facilitate civil participation in the local community. Tighter social relations are, as we have seen, characterised by higher civil participation among youth and a higher degree of informal services in the local community. For example, in a community characterised by *Gemeinschaft*, the civil sector could be expected to have a greater overview of local resources to mobilise in their work for bettering rural youth's quality of life, compared to a *Gesellschaft*-type society. On the other hand, there may be fewer resources to play with.

While the horizontal axis of the figure refers to an extra-community geographical dimension (i.e. distance between the community and the geographical centre), the vertical axis of the figure refers to intra-community distance. Arguably, this is an important factor in quality of life in rural communities for youth, as social interaction in a high-distance geographical frame is different from social interactions in a compact geographical frame, especially for youth that may not yet have a driver's licence. In these geographical contexts, public financial support could, for instance, be directed towards supporting civil sector initiatives to digitally organise carpooling. This also illustrates the interconnectedness of the rural dimensions, as such a quality of life scheme most likely also would need a change in the legal framework regarding the transport sectors (e.g. taxi concessions).

Youth participation in the local community is different than for adults and urban youth. Current approaches to civil sector and youth quality of life need to be expanded to better cover youth's social practices. This includes acts perceived as services among friends, like carpooling with members of the local community, helping neighbours and the like. A rural

policy geared towards quality of life instead of keeping up a given population size, is a promising path for rural communities in the peripheries facing the consequences of demographic shifts and increasing strain on social welfare as a consequence. Approaching rurality not as a fixed socio-spatial situation, but as a flow of socio-spatial situations in which different material features constitute different possibilities and paths for rural youth's quality of life and civil participation is a promising route forward.

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## The role of civil society in cultural heritage, digitalisation and the quality of rural life

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### Introduction

Cultural heritage can add to the quality of life in rural areas by mobilising local civil society, linking cultural with social capital formation and creating civic pride and sense of place, as we have argued elsewhere (Wallace & Beel, 2021). Here we follow up on our original research, which documented the early stages of digitalisation in 2011–2015 by looking at the impacts that had taken place by 2019. Digitalisation expands the reach of rural heritage to wider audiences nationally and internationally, thereby enabling new forms of participation and mobilisation. By this process, the ‘local’ becomes ‘global’ in a relational sense (Heley & Jones, 2012). It also enables the creation of community memory at the same time as using technology to link the future and the past (Stiegler, 2010).

Civil society is linked to social capital because the participation of people in local associations and organisations both formally (through membership) and informally (through activities such as social networking and meeting) are important elements (Pichler & Wallace, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Hence, civil society helps to generate collective social capital through value added to the community and individual social capital through networks and contacts. Social capital is intrinsically linked to cultural capital, as envisaged by Bourdieu (1983). Here we will show that the links between civil society, social capital and cultural capital can be demonstrated at a local level in communities where these factors intertwine and reinforce one another.

Drawing upon our work with local communities in Scotland, we argue that cultural heritage can provide the mobilising factor which links together different groups within the community in a common project which generates civic pride and a sense of place (Wallace et al., 2017; Wallace & Vincent, 2017; Beel et al., 2016; Beel & Wallace, 2020). Whereas until now we have looked synchronously at these factors, in this chapter we will consider the diachronical aspects by looking at how changes have taken place.

We focus here particularly on historical associations in the Outer Hebrides as examples of civil society.

Civil society takes a long time to establish and become embedded in communities. It is undermined by modern lifestyles that prioritise individualised entertainment and more dispersed networking (Putnam, 2000). This is illustrated in a generational shift away from formal styles of organisation (such as clubs and associations) and towards online and ego-centred social networking (Wellman et al., 2001). The widespread closure of pubs and rural schools, exacerbated by the COVID crisis, has removed some of the traditional arenas for social networking in rural communities. The decline of rural communities based around occupational communities such as coal mining or agriculture has further undermined the basis of local social capital. Furthermore, growing secularisation means that the church is no longer the focal point of the community that it once was. The population changes towards commuters and retirees mean that the social base of rural communities has shifted (Philip et al., 2012). What can therefore hold them together nowadays?

One factor has been a growing interest in local history. As communities face an increasingly blended, globalised world, local history has started to take on a new importance to forge distinctive identities and cultures (Wallace, 2020). The ‘disembedding’ of ideas and identities allowed by globalised culture can also result in a ‘re-embedding’ of identities in local culture (Giddens, 1990). This can feed an appetite for nostalgia, a rediscovery of local traditions and even their ‘invention’ in new forms. One aspect of this has been the desire to trace personal histories through family trees and family history, often as retirement projects for an ageing population. However, this interest in local history illustrates where biography and geography intersect.

Local historical societies bring together diverse interests including professional historians, amateur historians, locals and incomers. The increasing resources available online through the Internet, through public databases and even through commercial organisations offering to help trace family histories have made this view of the past all much more accessible. Social media, including the sharing of photographs on Facebook pages and Facebook groups have helped generate shared interests in revisiting the past. The burgeoning of local museums collecting objects, photos and histories has helped to strengthen these trends. Most of this local history is managed by volunteers – evidence of an invigorated civil society. In the guise of historical societies, civil society is thus a space for agency that – although related to – sits outside the direct control of state or market (Jessop, 2020). Ageing rural societies are particularly interesting in this respect; not only do older

people act as repositories of local knowledge, but they are also likely to be the most interested in local history with more leisure time to devote to it.

### Cultural and social capital in rural civil society

Our argument in this chapter is that cultural and social capital (as evinced in local historical associations) can be a focus for civil society. Obversely, the creation of these civil society organisations can serve as petrie dishes for generating the circulation of different forms of capital. Cultural capital is the set of attributes, dispositions and ‘taste’ that is valued in a given society (Bourdieu, 1984) and reproduces elite positions through the artefacts and knowledge that embody cultural goods. Bourdieu divided the concept of cultural capital into three different elements: *embodied*, the sense that such capital is passively acquired over time, for example due to family upbringing; *objectified*, which relates to the acquisition but also the knowledge of objects either for profit or show, an example being the knowledge and ability to purchase an expensive painting; and *institutionalised*, where some form of institutional recognition is given for achievement, often closely linked to educational success. Hence for Bourdieu, acquiring these key facets gives an individual power to act and to join specific fields.

While Bourdieu was concerned with society as a whole, we can also consider the generation of cultural capital within specific locations where the valuing of particular artefacts, expertise or knowledge has more specific meanings. Bourdieu was concerned with cultural capital mainly as a form of inclusion/exclusion in hierarchal social relations. However, in a local context, the building of knowledge around particular themes can also be a way of demonstrating an alternative cultural capital that, as will be shown, represents an *embodied* relationship to the history of landscape and community; an *objectified* relationship to the ephemera of the Gaelic island tradition in which value is placed in potentially forgotten objects by the different communities; and an *institutional* approach by how island communities have sought to formalise their links to historical heritage through forming social structures such as historical associations. In other words, we show how this is generated by minority communities from below rather than by hegemonic authority from above as Bourdieu originally conceptualised it. For this generation of heritage from below to be generated and shared, it relies upon social capital – something strong on the Outer Hebrides where participation in associational life has traditionally been high.

Cultural capital is circulated and reproduced through social capital. Social capital refers to the collective ‘value’ added to society from social networks

and participation in civic associations (Putnam, 2000). Like cultural value, social capital is therefore intangible in itself but can be understood through the various ways it is generated. For Bourdieu, social capital is the value embedded in social networks that individuals can realise to their advantage (Bourdieu, 1983). 'Social capital is the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Putnam (2000) feared that social capital was in decline due to changes in residential, work and leisure patterns. Yet in the Outer Hebrides it was extraordinarily strong and growing, partly as a result of intense interest in cultural heritage. Both social and cultural capital can help to generate cultural value, to which we now turn.

The chapter revolves around the transmission of cultural memory between individuals, communities and then across digital technology. Stiegler is concerned with the 'externalisation of knowledge' and how different 'technologies' externalise knowledge differently. In application of Stiegler's work, Wilson (2012) does what Elwood and Mitchell (2015, p. 150) state as:

They situate digital social and spatial media as 'technics' that, following Stiegler, externalise knowledge such that it can be transmitted across time and space. Within this framing, writing a letter, drawing, tweeting, or sharing a photo through Instagram are all technics that connect our knowledge and action in the present moment to knowledge and possible action in a future moment, and open the possibility of collective uptake of individual memory.

As a result, there are implications as to how and why knowledge is transmitted. Thus, the transference from older analogue technologies held within place-based archives to the digitally networked web-based ones impacts how this data is created, reinterpreted in digital form, understood and appropriated by individuals and communities. Digitalisation, then, redefines some of the socio-spatial relations that exist within, between and around these archives.

Therefore, it is argued that digitalisation provides new opportunities for cultural participation and that this development impacts upon the collective identities of those involved. This makes such activities more than just a technical process of putting collections online, but an embodied form of memory transmission with significant cultural value. Rose (2016) has highlighted that despite the often negative potential impacts or threats created by new technologies, there can also be several positive, unrealised impacts too (Thompson & Cupples, 2008) and this chapter, through its empirical materials, will highlight these. In this context we argue that historical societies, as a form of civil society, generate agency through their activity.

## Methodology

Our methodology involved contacting key informants and community leaders, starting in 2013 when we were involved in helping to digitise their historical records as part of an EPSRC-funded dot.rural Digital Economy Research Hub (2009–2014). This was followed by more intensive participant observation with historical associations and community events assisted by an AHRC grant on cultural value in 2015. These initial contacts were followed up in 2018–2019 with further interviews to understand how the early initiatives had developed as part of a REF Impact Case Study. We were therefore able to follow developments over time and to re-interview key informants on different occasions to help understand the flow of events. This was not so much a planned longitudinal study as a continuation of contact already made, enabling us to refine our key research aims as they evolved over time.

### The Comainn Eachdraidh movement in the Outer Hebrides

The Outer Hebrides consists of a string of islands on the westernmost fringe of Scotland. Their scattered and remote populations, numbering 27,000 altogether, include a strong Gaelic-speaking element. Mostly settled into small communities of crofts and other dwellings, the historical associations form a common civil society hub.

Cultural heritage has a substantial role in the Western Isles, through the organisation of historical associations in every island or subregion. Almost all local people subscribe, subscription costs being kept very low, from as little as £1 per year. These historical associations are usually referred to by their Gaelic name Comainn Eachdraidh (CE) and in some of them Gaelic is the spoken language. The CE represents a medium for the cultural transmission of meaning in order to present and preserve a way of life that for islanders is seen as fragile and under threat. The CE represents a strong set of associations developed over several decades and forms one of the most important civil society associations in this region. The CE movement began in the 1970s, linked to the history workshop movement (Samuel, 1981) with a very specific political and cultural purpose: collecting and preserving Highland and Island cultures, with particular reference to Gaelic. The first phase of the project took place from 1976 to 1982, beginning in Ness. It began with the key aim to create ‘an awareness of the cultural identity and community history as a means to boosting morale and promoting a discriminating understanding of the past and of its influence on the present’ (Mackay, 1996). Over the subsequent years, due to the popularity of the

project, new CE groups began to be established in different areas of the Hebrides, the latest being the recent creation of Eriskay CE on that island.

Today, twenty CE are currently active in the Outer Hebrides, all of which are entirely independent of each other. Each group has its own members, committee and collections, and is dedicated to researching its own specific geographical area. [Figure 15.1](#) shows how these are distributed around the islands. The most active members and primarily those involved in this study are older and (usually) retired. Still, cross-generational participation does occur in many ways, often through the shared use of CE buildings. Both men and women participate in the various activities that they run, and in these often sparsely populated and dispersed small settlements, they have a central role in the functioning of island life. Local CE associations have waxed and waned over the years, with some becoming very active and others moribund and new ones forming, reflecting shifts in local populations and key actors. The situation in 2015 is reflected in the map ([Figure 15.1](#)).

The different groups collect various materials relating to both physical objects, or what Bourdieu terms ‘objectified’ cultural capital. These might include school logbooks, individual collections of diaries, notes and photographs, personal objects, industrial objects, archaeological artefacts, newspaper cuttings, paintings, crofts, buildings, boats and gravestones. However, other aspects of cultural heritage are less tangible and could include oral histories and stories, genealogical knowledge, shielings, local place names, patronymics, *Bárdachd* (poetry), local dialects, Gaelic dialects, Gaelic terms, and recipes. Some of these were collected and stored but others were part of the living cultural heritage of the community and were embodied in particular people or networks. The artefacts themselves represented ‘embodied cultural capital’ in Bourdieu’s terminology insofar as they had meaning for that particular community in terms of local knowledge. This reflects a form of vernacular heritage, which is embedded within its places of production. Like all community groups, they were teeming with micro-political relations both within each CE and in relation to each other. This reflects that although different CE groups have similar interests and follow similar narratives, they do not form a hegemonic movement or represent a singular community interest.

Some CEs have opened museums, and these are often housed in the old schoolhouses. The need for the schoolhouses having changed with the centralisation of the school system and the ageing of the rural population means that the schoolhouse could be given over as a meeting place, often initially formed round the local CE. The photograph in [Figure 15.2](#) shows the Ness (Nis) CE as we found it in 2013 when it housed a local collection of objects and a small cafe staffed by volunteers. At this point it still looks like an old school building. Elsewhere collections are housed in people’s private houses



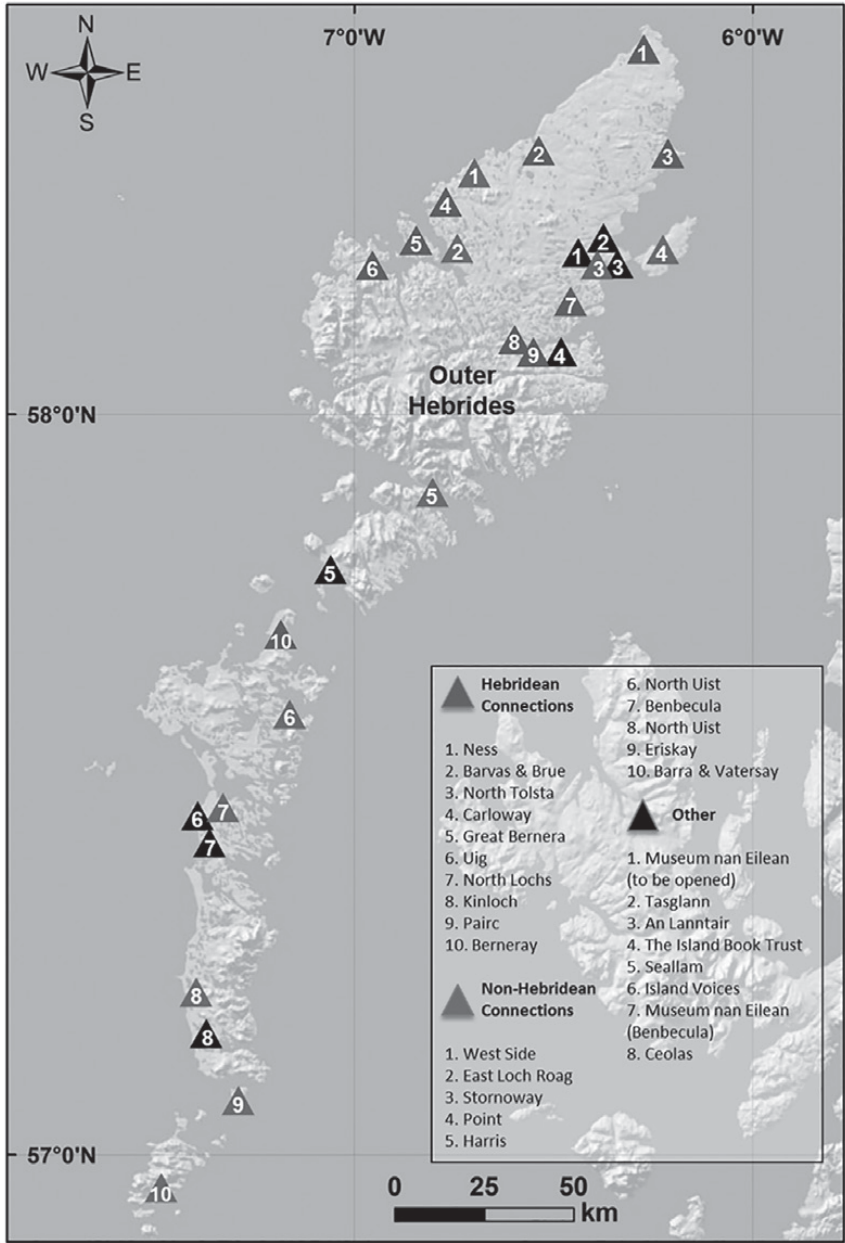


Figure 15.1 Map of Comainn Eachdraidh associations in the Outer Hebrides in 2015.



**Figure 15.2** Ness (Nis) Comainn Eachdraidh in 2013.

or other buildings that can be communally accessed. The display of artefacts, usually donated by local people, has relevance determined by their location in the local community and might include a shepherd's crook or spinning wheel passed down through the family. Hence, these artefacts have a meaning according to how they are embedded in local community relationships.

Some of the museums have developed further functions. For example, one CE located at Ravenspoint on the Isle of Lewis has developed further activities including Gaelic language teaching courses, a book publishing enterprise, a local shop and in 2015 was putting in a petrol station for locals who would otherwise have to travel many miles to fill their tanks. Hence, cultural heritage encourages many ancillary activities that are valued by the local community and which arise from their needs.

The CE involves volunteers who meet on a regular basis to sort through photographs and other documentation and to exchange information about them. This is cross-checked against an index of information about people living in the area, school records and so on, representing a mixing of volunteers' 'living knowledge' with what has been recorded. This is a highly social activity as volunteers reminisce and tell stories about the documents.

This also highlights something else about the process of maintaining and producing archives: the sense of self-worth that members gain from their participation in the process of producing the archives. These meetings were an opportunity to develop it. Despite it being slow and highly time consuming, many still took great pleasure from these activities. For the volunteers, the contribution of their own knowledge and remembering people, places and events together with others gave them great satisfaction. Furthermore, the desire to comprehend personal and community histories and genealogies often acts as the ‘spark’ that draws people into being involved with a CE. As one of the contributors told us:

I just, again, came to Comainn Eachdraidh, I don’t know how, it’s so long ago I can’t remember! I suppose I was always interested in my roots and I had an uncle who was very interested in genealogy and I suppose I just got into it that way and here I am, decades later and that’s it: once you are in, you are in, you are hooked! Decades later and that’s it.

The main work of the CE groups revolves around the production and maintenance of their individual physical archives and the collecting of history and heritage related to their own areas. Archives such as those collected by a CE are generated as an articulation of ‘heritage from below’ (Robertson, 2012). They represent spaces of ‘marginalised memory’ (Cresswell, 2011) by attempting to give a counterpoint to more top-down and mainstream articulations of history (Mason & Baveystock, 2008). They in themselves represent ‘mechanisms’ or ‘technologies’ for preserving memory across spacetimes (Stiegler, 2010). As Stevens et al. (2010, p. 68) suggest, their relevance and value extends well beyond the physical site of the archive itself: it is ‘the active and on-going involvement in the source community in documenting and making accessible their history on their own terms’. This makes understanding the practice of archive production among volunteers central to comprehending their broader value as it produces both cultural capital in terms of local knowledge/expertise and social capital in terms of collective involvement (Beel et al., 2016).

This generation of heritage from below ‘is both a means to and manifestation of counter hegemonic practises’ (Robertson, 2012, p. 7) based upon the lives of ordinary people. Central to these arguments is place, identity and a notion of dwelling (Ingold, 2000) that builds over time and reinforces each in relation to the heritage the communities wish to create. In the context of the Western Isles, this further builds upon a relationship in the Gaelic communities between sense of place, identity and possession whereby ‘attachments to place are intrinsic to identity, rather than to buildings or monuments’ (Robertson, 2012, p. 154). The Gaelic language infuses names of places and the people who inhabited them with a rich sense of meaning,

both past and present. This rich heritage was often lost in translations into English. For example, the limited repertoire of people's names in English used by census recorders or by public administration fails to distinguish the diversity of lineages denoted by nicknames and patronymics. The communities on the Outer Hebrides had a strong sense of their histories being misread or misrepresented by outsiders, especially those that did not understand Gaelic. This built on the sense of historical injury which grew out of dispossession through the Highland Clearances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when landlords evicted Gaelic communities from their land and the subsequent suppression of the language until the late twentieth century. In this sense it was a form of oppositional cultural capital embodied in the traditions and places from which it has emerged.

The key way in which the CE present a historical sense of place tied to the land is through documenting the crofts and the people who lived on those crofts, often connected genealogically to the current members. Crofting rights emerged from legislation at the end of the nineteenth century aiming to repopulate marginal land emptied through the clearances and emerged from a popular movement (Mackenzie, 2013). Crofting still holds a privileged place in Scottish Agricultural Policy as forming an integral part of the rural economy in marginal locations. This relationship between land, people and place is what makes the CE so interesting and often so different to other historical societies throughout the UK; very few other places are able to represent such a lineage. It also makes a strong political statement with regard to land tenure, an exceptionally contentious issue in the islands both in the past as now (Hunter, 1976). In this setting, the archive stands as a statement of endurance, ingenuity and perseverance for the families that have maintained their connection to the land, and which has continued through previous generations. This longevity of knowledge for CEs is particularly valuable to these communities as it shows their continued embeddedness in the landscape.

Hence, local knowledge enriches the experience of place and in part highlights why some of the CE activities of collection take place. This is in terms of wanting to 'know', in detail, about the place they are from and how that has produced the landscape in which they live. What may seem a simple observation to 'look out for' shows an attention to detail to observe and be in a landscape. This is a key part of how CEs value local knowledge about place and expand into a series of other activities that attempt to codify space as 'known' as well as it being culturally significant. A number of CEs have chosen to map out all the distinctive Gaelic place names which relate to agricultural land where sheep would have been previously kept by crofters. To a certain extent these names went out of use due to changes in agricultural practices, but to remap and reclaim them is to again symbolise the landscape

in terms of the past practices of crofters and helps maintain their Gaelic names. These processes are bound within notions of dwelling (Rose, 2016) in terms of a set of processes that attempt to mark and claim the landscape.

Although cultural capital in this sense embodied local knowledge, it is also linked to social capital in the way in which heritage activities and meetings of CEs help to value and reproduce this knowledge. Despite this emphasis on traditional communities, in fact many of the residents of the Outer Hebrides are ‘incomers’, reflecting trends in retirement and counter-urbanisation, which can cause resentment (Jedrej & Nuttall, 1996). Yet through participating in cultural heritage work and the CEs, incoming members of the community are able to form links with the surrounding community, both social and symbolic. It helps them to establish themselves in the local landscape and participate in this embedded knowledge. Indeed, the strong sense of community is one of the factors that attracts them there.

Hence, in Bourdieu’s sense, embodied cultural capital was managed through the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, genealogies and names, while objectivised cultural capital was embodied in the archives and artefacts themselves. These forms of cultural capital were institutionalised through the CE itself, which also represented one of the main forms of social capital. However, in contrast to the kinds of elite or hegemonic cultural capital that Bourdieu was mainly concerned with, the forms of cultural capital described here were embedded in the history of a particular locality.

### **Historical associations and civil society**

Cultural and social capital are embedded in this example in community knowledge, and this sense of community is kept alive by the civil society associated with it. The process of developing these community archives is centred around social relationships and is the process by which ‘value’ is attributed by community members that are involved. The CE groups enjoyed the process of reminiscing as they sifted through these collections, such as remembering their past schooldays and those of others. This was the reason why old photographs, rolls of honour (a record of those lost at war) and school records were particularly treasured. It was also how the conversation moved to draw out the memories of older volunteers so that they could then be written up or drawn upon for others to gain a stronger sense of the history of the area. Thus, narratives play a central role in making cultural meaning transmissible in different ways (Stiegler, 2010). This process is more than simply handing down objects from generation to generation, as the narrative itself is the first kind of externalisation that then allows following things to happen. Hence, the shift from oral narration to textual

archive (which constitutes the primary work of the CE movement to date) is the foundation upon which digitised content can be created; this in turn allows a whole set of other things to happen (Wilson, 2012; Stiegler, 2010). Therefore, this means such processes contribute to something bigger, something more fundamental, that continues to lead to an ongoing production of the history of place for the Western Isles: if this did not happen, such memories and knowledge would be lost. The narratives also create meaning out of the collection of objects found in the museums (such as milk churns, old domestic equipment, spinning wheels and shepherd's crooks) whose value is created by the narratives which have meaning in that community due to their 'externalisation'. For example, the spinning wheels were often passed down through female lines of descent, as the shepherd's crooks were through male ones. Hence by meeting and reminiscing in the CE groups, embodied cultural capital could be inscribed in the collection of artefacts and their meaning preserved.

The process itself, the shared experience of participating, collecting and listening with others, the sense of producing something of worth for the community and its ability to bring people together, contributed to a sense of well-being and cohesiveness:

I think the word in itself says that: 'community'; because it is bringing something together which is common to us all. We don't get together that much, as a community, as people here – as they used to in the past. And if you've got something like this and it will drag people together, then it's a good thing. We need something in our communities actually to keep the people coming together as a community and if we didn't do it, it would be just another bit that was lost.

However, it was also the way in which the community constituted itself. The non-inclusion of uncomfortable memories such as religious schism, divorce, crime and incest means that representations of island life were circumscribed. Hence a representation of community cohesion was part of the way in which the communities constructed themselves (Wallace et al., 2017). It is also how the groups define and decide what knowledge is valuable to them and what is not. This process, like in any cultural institution, reflects their practices, or what Hetherington refers to as the 'regime of curiosity', which is attuned to 'pick out' the things, objects and narratives that other collections or historians have missed, chosen to ignore or seen as irrelevant, but which are also selective in their representation (Hetherington, 2006). Hence this history is no less 'true' than the larger academic narratives, but forms part of the social relations of the community itself. A large proportion of this reflects how, as has been mentioned, the CE groups want to develop their own sense of history and identity, which they collect and narrate

(selectively) on their terms. This has, to date, been created collectively and resulted in vast repositories of materials for the different communities.

For CE members it is important to value ‘things’: objects, stories and genealogical knowledge that others might have missed, chosen not to keep or which have simply never been recorded. Hence this sense of historical loss was part of the motivation to record and collect:

Well if it’s not recorded it will go, it will just be oral history and there has always been a tradition of oral history which is why there’s a lot of things you know but you have no record of ... it’s just something you’ve always heard but it’s never been written down anywhere and I think these things should be recorded. And I think they have as much value as written history, while they are still oral. I think some people denigrate oral history as something that doesn’t have the same value because it’s hearsay, in a way, and it doesn’t – there’s nothing to verify it but it’s still extremely valuable I think, in local history.

Therefore, the process of collecting is a form of social memory (Nora, 1989) that creates a repository of community knowledge which others can use to learn about their history and heritage. The process therefore reflects a central ontological angst that the CE groups share and partly drives their activities. If they were not to collect this information, it would be lost:

I’m in my mid-seventies now so growing up, there was no television or even radio, a couple of people had radio so it was either playing outside or else in the *taighean* [ceilidh] and listening to the stories ... It was really to give it a proper status and start recording stuff because we were realising that the stories were being lost and it’s only people like myself now, who is [recognised] as the older generation – I still feel, going looking for older people to record and then I realise, ‘Well that’s me!’ But that’s really how it started; trying to record as much as possible before any more is lost.

And we were given a sense that the oral tradition was beginning to break up. And I suppose a key driver was to get ... we had, for instance, we had people who had spent a lot of time in Patagonia, we had people who had come back from Australia and it wasn’t one or two people going out, it was maybe fifteen, twenty men from the community going away to Patagonia, there was a real sense we had to get some information on that before these people passed over. And I think that was one of the key drivers.

The respondents above highlight how such community knowledge was previously passed on and how this has had to change due to ways in which people no longer gather or retain information as they had in the past. Therefore the archive becomes the cultural repository for this knowledge and memory, acting as a point of reference for communities to trace back and gather their histories. Once recorded and documented it could become ‘institutionalised social capital’ and therefore preserved.

In this way respondents help to create a representation of community. However, community is a contested concept (Mulligan, 2015) and while cultural heritage helps to create a sense of historical continuity, it belies the fact that the population of these communities has changed over time with population decline followed by more recent counter-urbanisation. This has brought an influx of a retirement population, many of whom are not Gaelic speaking, but are nevertheless keen to belong. The loss of younger families is reflected in the availability of schoolhouses for conversion to cultural heritage centres. The keen sense of nostalgia and potential loss that emerges in the interviews perhaps reflects an awareness of a particular chapter of history and residents' lives coming to an end. And yet the work of CEs has also helped to revitalise these small, remote communities.

The nature of these developments reflects the landscape of living in the Outer Hebrides, whereby outside the main town of Stornoway, the population is sparse and amenities are limited. Hence many CEs have sought to fill many of the gaps in provision that this brings, consequently extending the role the CEs have in different communities. This comes from both a desire to improve the amenities in an area but also represents the need for CEs to find other forms of income to support their activities. As the CE member below states, the need to generate revenue to sustain the CE's activities causes them to move beyond the activities of collecting histories and into other areas:

My lead role at the moment in the Comainn Eachdraidh is looking at ways to widen it to make it sustainable. So that the museum, which I see as very important and the archive, may not generate money in themselves, they will generate massive interest and bring people in and it's looking at things like having a cafe on the site or something so we can get some money. We'll get some money from the heritage, historical side, in terms of book sales and things like that but only probably enough to justify having done it; we'll break even on them. We're not going to make massive profits on anything in that.

As well as this, CE members have been strongly involved in the move towards the community ownership of land, which is possible under Scottish law, whereby surrounding land is acquired by the local community. Comainn Eachdraidh members have often played a strong role in making these kinds of community-led initiatives happen (Skerratt & Hall, 2011), which is often generated by their strong understanding of local history and the historical vulnerability of land tenure in a crofting system. Therefore, although starting with a focus based upon cultural heritage, the activities involved spill out into other things within their communities, giving CEs an even stronger and more central role than a historical association would normally have in the UK. It can also be realised in terms of economic value as the respondent above makes clear.



Although the focus might be primarily on collecting community history, due to the cultural and social capital that this produces, it becomes so much more within the locations, offering amenities, employment (both paid and voluntary) and educational opportunities. This is a key component to how all CE groups develop and consequently bring a form of cultural value to their communities that builds on their core activities. This in turn nurtures community ties and guarantees that such archive spaces are active the majority of the time.

### **Embracing digital opportunities**

In 2011 a team of us at the dot.rural digital hub at the University of Aberdeen was invited to help the nascent digital platform 'Hebridean Connections' to develop a new online platform. This initiative to link the different CEs across the islands by providing a common, searchable database had run aground by being dependent on commercial software, which had in itself become obsolete. Therefore, a research team at the University of Aberdeen helped to set up a new database using free open-source software. Using semantic web technology, it was able to link to other archives and databases as well as conjoining the material across the islands. In this way, it was able to link residents, crofts, fishing boats and other information (Tait et al., 2013). However, this required that volunteers at the local CEs were trained to provide and validate data on the database. This meant that for the first time, genealogies could be linked across different CE regions. By providing a network linking the various CE organisations and a method for linking their various collections, Hebridean Connections took local cultural heritage to a new stage. It forms a new era of the institutionalisation of local cultural capital. Not all communities wanted to form part of Hebridean Connections, however, whether or not they digitised their collections, as they were concerned about losing control of their material as it moved into a digital dimension. Digitalisation was not seen as a universal positive by all the groups or by members within CEs that had decided to contribute to Hebridean Connections.

I definitely hope to have a greater understanding of the local community. And I suppose through Comainn Eachdraidh, definitely, I will meet more people. Even that day sitting in that room, because I didn't know who half the people were ... I suppose I'll get to know who more people are, locally, so that's definitely something that I'll gain from it.

The above quote highlights two things about the use of digital technology, both how knowledge (for the individual) is through digital activity and how their relationship to the local community is also (re)produced by their

participation. Thus, the mixing and meeting with other CEs through the training provided by Hebridean Connections has created a space through which stronger connections between communities and individuals can be built. The system itself, and the need to collaborate in the production of digital records, has also meant that much more dialogue between the groups has been facilitated. This is interesting in itself as Putnam (2000), in his articulation of social capital, suggested that digital technologies were partly at fault for the loss of such relationships. Here, collaboration and participation in the project show something different is taking place, suggesting that digital activities such as these need not be isolating and the very practices that produce digital forms as in themselves reconstituting socio-spatial relationships (Rose, 2016).

Second, for newcomers to island communities, the ability to help on the project has been a significant 'bridge' into CE groups, allowing 'outsiders' to bond and integrate into pre-existing communities more easily:

Well I'm learning new skills. It's on a very simple level at the moment, just being taught how to create records and now that a bit more time is becoming available, I hope to become a bit more active with the local historical society. So gaining knowledge and contacts.

I don't know, I think if you live in a community you have to give something back to the community. So to me, it's a two-way street; I get lots of knowledge and information about the actual community that I live in and in return I can give something back: data entry is not a complicated job to do. Having done research in my own family history, it's a complicated thing to understand, a lot of the records and things don't make sense or add up but for me, I think it's nice to be part of the local community.

As we can see, the digitalisation of heritage was also a way of generating new kinds of cultural and social capital. Perhaps this outside view helped to prompt the institutionalisation of embodied cultural capital that was otherwise locked in the heads and memories of some local community members and in danger of dying with them. People wishing to understand local history or research their ancestry would be referred to particular individuals who might know. Digitalisation encouraged the institutionalisation and transmission of embodied knowledge.

The ability to take part in an activity in which you could be helpful to a pre-existing group, by bringing externally acquired skills but not be viewed as in some way 'overbearing', was an opportunity that a variety of participants really benefited from. Therefore, the nature of the voluntary 'digital work' that creating archives like these produces has allowed people to integrate into a community more easily. Here, cultural activity and the ability to participate creates different forms of cultural value for those involved. The community acquires more members who can make a

meaningful contribution despite not having an in-depth knowledge of the locale. Those coming in can further develop their sense of connectedness within the community. It also represents how the CE movement is not just indigenous islanders remembering their past but a vibrant series of communities attracting incomers who bring skills as well as bridging social capital to institutions outside the island.

Third, digitalisation also fostered another kind of social linking – to the Scottish diaspora communities. The keen interest in Scottish heritage and in tracing ‘one’s roots’ that is found among Scottish descendants elsewhere provides a new set of users and contributors to the digital platform. These more geographically scattered people could link in to cultural heritage information through the use of Hebridean Connections websites and databases which provided information about former residents, their fishing boats, marriages and crofts and places where they were born and died.

Therefore digitalisation was seen as a way to preserve historical records of value to the communities. Crumbling papers, obsolescent tape recordings and fading photos could be preserved, enhanced and given a new life online. This again picks up upon the work of Stiegler (2010) but seeks to extend it too. Stiegler highlights how this form of pedagogical memory works and seeks to transmit cultural knowledge across generations, only here, through the different and new ‘connectivities’ being created, the transmission of cultural memory moves beyond generational transmission, to encompass people external to that ancestral relationship. To caveat this, to some, this was also seen as a threat to local communities who would thereby lose control to some extent of ‘their’ historical narratives and property. Additional and contested narratives could arrive from outside the community (for example from diaspora communities) and materials become submerged in the great global ocean of communications and subsequently remashed in unknown ways. This was why some CEs refused to participate in the online platforms created by Hebridean Connections.

The project enabled the creation of a database of records, which could be cross-referenced and accessed openly based upon individuals, crofts, fishing boats or other reference points (Tait et al., 2013) enabling online searches and constructing new information and narratives around local sources as they were connected in new ways both internally and externally. This therefore represents what Rose (2016) terms as the movement of cultural ‘artefacts’ into digital form and this chapter seeks to consider the changing geographies created by such a transition to collective way of knowing (Elwood & Mitchell, 2015). Central to this, as has been to various geographers interested in transference to digital technology, is the work of Stiegler (2010) who frames this chapter in addition to the more arbitrary notions of cultural value above.

### **The Comainn Eachdraidh – six years on**

A set of follow-up interviews in 2019 illustrated some of the successes as well as the pitfalls of the digitalisation of cultural heritage. The database, which had been running from 2015 to 2019, generated ‘hits’ from an astonishing 151,096 people from 153 countries. Hence, while the database helped make local records more manageable and sustainable for local communities, it also helped link those communities with a wider world. So the ‘local’ became ‘global’. In doing so, it was evident that the wider diaspora was also invested in a sense of local community with which they identified through their sense of history. In the words of one respondent: ‘It starts with the local and it makes it international if you like ... People from all over the world have connections with the place.’ Many anecdotal stories about how people who had been researching their family ancestry in North America were put in touch with the local Comainn Eachdraidh, whose members welcomed them and introduced them to relatives and showed them where their forebears had lived. As one key informant put it: ‘People who emigrated are very interested in what happens locally. What they do. They come back to visit. A lot of people get in touch with requests mainly about family history.’

This global exposure also generated new materials as people arrived with correspondence or news from people who had emigrated:

We’ve had increasing numbers of people coming from Canada and America wanting to research their families ... One particular lady had some notion that there was a connection to the place and tapped in connections (digitally) and through Hebridean Connections got in touch with me. We were able to take her to that croft where her great-grandparents were born. She came here from Virginia. And she was absolutely delighted .... I would say that aspect of what we do is certainly important and increasing in frequency. And I think part of that is Hebridean Connections.

This use of digital infrastructure also helped to engage younger people and the wider community in curating local history. The use of the schoolhouse also helped to connect to sports, fitness, mothers and toddlers and other groups which brought economic as well as social benefits to these communities. In the words of one respondent, ‘It is about forging links between heritage, the arts and tourism as economic drivers’. The links with the wider diaspora helped create opportunities for local communities to share their knowledge. The interest turned out to be more than had been expected. In the words of one local CE secretary:

We get about three inquires per month, something of that order. About one a week. For instance, we had one person from New Zealand who subsequently

came here to live in the area and trace his relatives. Seven of his family came back here for a week and we set up a couple of meetings with his family down here. So one inquiry can generate a massive amount of contact further down the line.

However, it also revealed some problems with this kind of digitalisation for local historical associations. The management of the Hebridean Connections website had been taken over by the islands local authority who employed 1.5 people with historical training to do this. This was a reflection of the local importance of the initiative. However, its popularity generated its own problems as this small number of workers were inundated with requests for information, not all of which could be followed up.

Local authority spending cuts had cut the service to the bone and even the 1.5 people employed also had to spread their time with other projects. The Facebook page in particular had generated a lot of interest and through the Facebook page people were redirected to the database and eventually to the relevant local CE branch. However, the database still relied on volunteers to upload and validate information, which was a painstaking and time-consuming piece of work that only trained volunteers could take up. There were not enough of them and therefore there was a backlog of materials that were on the database and not yet validated. This is where the Facebook pages took on a life of their own, because it was relatively easy to upload and discuss photographs or other data. The Facebook page provided a very fast turnaround of information, was more easily accessed and enabled strong participation – in contrast to the Hebridean Connections database where all entries have to be laboriously and manually validated.

This led the Hebridean Connections management to develop a revamped and easier database whereby materials could be uploaded for public information and only later validated. However, due to lack of funding, the launch had been delayed at the time of our interviews in 2019.

A further complication was that since our initial contact in 2011, European Union GDPR legislation came into force, limiting what personal information could be held digitally. This meant that all living persons had to be expunged from the database and only information about deceased persons could be uploaded. This was sometimes a problem for those trying to find information about living relatives.

It became clear that the value of this database was a product of it constantly being updated and validated. Yet this activity was under threat due to the lack of trained volunteers (the training had taken place in 2015 and some of those trained had dropped out, died or moved away, so more training was needed). The whole project was under threat due to lack of funds and the uneven nature of project funding, which tended to be time

limited. We had already discovered that the timing of project funding did not always coincide with what was needed, which was why there had been a two-year delay between initially setting up the Hebridean Connections project and actually implementing it, which was only possible when a grant had allowed two project officers to be employed for a year to go round and train volunteers in the CE branches.

However, many of the local CE branches had meanwhile thrived. The local Ness CE boasted 3,500 visitors in the month of July, had completely rebuilt the old schoolhouse and now had an elegant cafe, spacious meeting space, shop and exhibition space in addition to the local archive. These activities spawned other ones and it now has a youth club, kids' after school club, men's shed, day club for seniors, Happy Ness (another seniors club) and a football club. In this way (and through the judicious use of grants) it spread its uses and resources to wider groups in the community. The photograph (Figure 15.3) illustrates the rebuilt schoolhouse as we found it in 2019.

With these examples, we can see how what begins as cultural heritage can lead to many other activities that help to bridge different generations of men and women. The local museum becomes a community focal point. This



**Figure 15.3** Ness (Nis) Comainn Eachdraidh in 2019.

also helps to generate economic benefits for the community, even if that was not the first principle, even in fairly remote islands: ‘And the idea has always been that with that information (from the database) they’ll then come and visit Bernera itself and spend money and provide a bit of income that way.’ Digitalisation helps to preserve cultural heritage and to make it available to a wider world. However, it is also dependent upon affordable and accessible technology – the reason we became involved in the project in the first place was that the previous database could only be maintained by a professional service – something which was unsustainable in the longer term. Therefore, the Hebridean Connections project was in some ways a victim of its own success as it created a demand that could not always be fulfilled. It also widened the idea of ‘local knowledge’ with keen contributions from the diaspora community who also added their materials in the form of letters, photos and information about families who had emigrated.

A further dimension may have taken place with the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented travel but increased the importance of digital connectivity. The islands had their own digital networks and infrastructure, sometimes better than on the mainland, thanks to the judicious deployment of grants and other resources, including self-help for communities that were familiar with managing on their own (Wallace et al., 2015). Therefore, remoteness did not necessarily mean that they were cut off. However, this happened after our later data gathering project and would need to be the topic of further research.

## Conclusions

We have shown how local historical associations on the Outer Hebrides known as the Comainn Eachdraidh have helped generate cultural and social capital within their localities and across the islands. An important part of this is their sense of uniqueness of place represented in the Gaelic language. This cultural and social capital, involving a sense of local pride, is related to the strong participation in civil society found in these remote places where people have had to fall back on local resources for their sustainability.

Digitalisation has helped to further sustain these activities, made them more globally accessible and produced a new focus of activity for local CEs and their collective representation through the digital platform, Hebridean Connections. Digitalisation has produced both advantages and threats. The advantages include linking these islands to a wider diaspora and community of interest worldwide and encouraging visitor flow and benefits for the local economy. Threats include the loss of control of information by local associations and the creation of a demand that small groups of older

volunteers cannot always fulfil. The follow-up research in 2019 illustrated the evolving tendencies in these connections with some CEs unable to keep up with the digitalisation programme and a new platform needed to be created to manage the large numbers of inquiries.

The research illustrates how social and cultural capital are connected at a local level, something that is vague in Bourdieu's own formulation of the issues. It also illustrates how cultural transmission occurs through technology to link the past with the present and the future as Stiegler (2010) intimated. He argues that media technology has come to dominate memory and consciousness as a form of 'telecracy', although he was writing before the widespread use of social media enabled the mass participation of people in generating media. However, while Stiegler emphasised the centralised top-down nature of media technology and was critical of the commercialisation of digital infrastructures as part of the political economy of capitalism more generally, the CE movement helped to show how local control of this infrastructure can also help to empower local civil society and thus benefit rural quality of life.

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## Volunteering neighbourhood mothers: a capability approach to voluntarism, inclusion and quality of life in rural Norway

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### Introduction

Central topics in research on the quality of life, well-being and health are the importance of interaction, social networks, inclusion and trust. The voluntary sector constitutes a field in society outside the family, the state and the market, where so-called secondary social relations are produced and maintained. Research on the connection between voluntarism and quality of life has thus received increased attention in recent years and is being studied both at a societal and individual level.

In this chapter, we will propose a theoretical framework introducing some of the former research on voluntarism from the perspective of quality of life. A starting point for this presentation is our own research on voluntary organisations in a Nordic context, more specifically in Norway. Together with the other Nordic countries, Norway is characterised by extensive democratic participation and high levels of volunteering, and most of the volunteering takes place within voluntary organisations (Enjolras & Strømsnes, 2018). We will present some former research on the connection between voluntary work and quality of life and further introduce some of the characteristics of participation in Norwegian volunteering by ethnic marginalised groups and some contextual characteristics of the voluntary sector in Norway. The capability approach of Amartya Sen will function as an overarching theoretical framework. This theoretical approach highlights both individualistic and contextual elements and how they interconnect and produce certain structures for how and who are included in social groups that may improve the quality of life for the volunteers. Individual factors in focus are, for example, gender, language skills and minority background. The contextual factors are investigated by comparing participation in a specific voluntary organisation, the Neighbourhood Mothers, in a rural community (Kvam Herad) versus in a larger city (Oslo).

The empirical contribution in this chapter consists, besides building on secondary data from former research on the Norwegian voluntary sector, of a case study on the voluntary organisation called Neighbourhood Mothers in Norway, an organisation with a head office in Oslo and several local organisations in different parts of the country. The data used for this chapter was collected in the municipality of Kvam Herad (a town of 8,467 citizens) in Western Norway county and the organisation in Oslo (a city of 693,494 citizens). The data stems from an ongoing PhD project on volunteering performed by ethnic minority women, some with limited Norwegian language skills. This is a group of citizens with the lowest participation in Norwegian volunteering and a group that has been difficult to include and mobilise into voluntarism (Eimhjellen et al., 2021).

This chapter presents some of the results from this ongoing qualitative case study on how marginalised women with low language skills are included in a specific voluntary organisation in two different contexts and, further, how they view this participation's effect on their well-being.

### **Case description: Neighbourhood Mothers in rural Norway**

Neighbourhood Mothers (from now on referred to as NM) is a voluntary organisation where ethnic marginalised women labelled as *neighbourhood mothers* work through a combination of volunteering, local participation, networking and empowerment (Andersen & Banerjee, 2020; Neighbourhood Mothers, 2020). The organisation operates in the voluntary and public sector intersection, combining networking and dialogue across different sectors, citizens and professionals. The main goal is to mobilise these groups of women to voluntary work within the framework of a formal organisation and develop and foster collaborations between the voluntary neighbourhood mothers and public service institutions in different areas such as work inclusion, education and health. Strong learning and skill training runs through the NM education programme, which must be completed before volunteering as neighbourhood mothers (Neighborhood Mothers, 2020; [www.bydelsmor.no](http://www.bydelsmor.no)). Stakeholders from local community organisations and the health and welfare services provide lectures on family, health, welfare and government structures. After gaining tools and ideas for how to engage in local outreach work and in-depth knowledge of the service institutions and the local community, the neighbourhood mothers go back to their neighbourhood to help women and families with whatever they need: information about the healthcare system, organised activities for children, education opportunities and so on.

The original idea of NM was developed in Germany in 2004 as an early protection intervention to integrate ‘hard to reach’ immigrant families and as an employment opportunity for ethnic marginalised women (Evers et al., 2014). Working as neighbourhood mothers in the community counted as an employment creation measure, earning an extra small fee on top of their regular welfare money (Evers et al., 2014). In 2008, the NM initiative got imported to Denmark, where a manual to help others replicate the initiative on a voluntary basis was created (<https://bydelsmor.dk/english>). Today, the Danish NM organisational model has been successfully reproduced in all the Nordic countries. In 2016, the Norwegian NM was established. The organisation started with its head office in Oslo, the capital of Norway, and is now expanding to different parts of the country. The project ‘Neighbourhood Mothers in rural Norway’ was initiated in 2019 to make adjustments to the NM concept to make it transferable from the city to the countryside. The eleven neighbourhood mothers in Kvam Herad (from now on referred to as Kvam) were the first women to complete the NM education programme outside Oslo.

### The capability approach

A starting point for much research on the quality of life is the so-called Stiglitz Commission’s report, ‘The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress’ (CMEPSP), which is a report representing the capability approach and seeking to include a broader spectrum of resources than what is expected in economic models. Sen first introduced the concept of capability in his Tanner Lectures on the subject of *Equality of What?* (Sen, 1979), and argued that what is missing from traditional economic models is a notion of what activities people can undertake (‘doings’) and the kinds of persons they can be (‘beings’). This notion, concerning both individual and contextual aspects, is what Sen calls ‘capabilities’. By focusing on what people can do and be, rather than merely on the distribution of goods and resources, the capability approach recognises the diversity of people’s ability to convert those resources and goods into real opportunities (Sen 1979). In the Stiglitz report, capabilities are linked to the following eight dimensions: (1) material living standards; (2) health; (3) education; (4) personal activities; (5) political voice and governance; (6) social connections and relationships; (7) environment; and (8) insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature (Stiglitz et al., 2009). In this chapter, we focus on the voluntary sector and how it may improve the quality of life, conditioned on the capability to volunteer, including both individual and contextual factors. In the perspective of the Stiglitz report,

it can be argued that the voluntary sector (voluntary organisations and voluntary work) fulfils several vital functions that affect people's quality of life, welfare, well-being and happiness, e.g. dimensions 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8 concerning health, personal activities, political voice and governance, social connections and relationships and security, but the environment dimension (7) is also covered by, for example, environmental organisations.

Differences in the context of local communities affect access to voluntary participation on the one hand and the demand for volunteer work in different local contexts on the other hand. Determinants of who is doing voluntary work seem to be conditioned on human, economic, social and cultural capital (Wilson & Musick, 1997; Wollebæk et al., 2015). However, the individual forms of social and cultural capital are influenced by structural features that impact their availability and distribution in each context. This could be about the size of the existing population of voluntary organisations, e.g. in different municipalities, or characteristics of the organisations such as levels of formalisation or number of members.

### **Voluntarism, health and quality of life**

Research on the correlation between volunteering, well-being, good health and individuals' quality of life often shows that volunteers report better health and quality of life than non-volunteers do (Fladmoe & Folkestad, 2017). However, it is challenging to uncover a causal explanation in this connection: Is it possible to improve health and well-being by doing voluntary work, or is it instead individuals with solid health and quality of life that are included or choose to participate in a voluntary organisation? Although it is difficult to uncover such a causal connection, several studies find that for people, who for various reasons are marginalised in society and local communities, such as the unemployed, the elderly, young people in isolation, the chronically ill, or newcomers, can benefit particularly from participation in voluntary organisations (Loga, 2010; Fladmoe & Folkestad, 2017).

At the societal level, there is much research, for example in the field of social capital research, claiming that a high level of voluntary work and a large number of voluntary organisations contribute to increasing the quality of life in a society. Putnam (2000) considers participation in voluntary organisations as both a cause and an effect on the quality of society: a sizeable voluntary sector creates trusting communities, and trusting communities produce collective action and active civil society. Research on well-being and the quality of life identifies 'happy societies', that is, countries that score high on indicators measuring the quality of life and happiness, as

democratic, trusting, stable, inclusive and characterised by a decentralised authority. Living in such societies is the most crucial prerequisite for individual quality of life (Rothstein, 2010; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2010). Thus, this research gives arguments for local governments to build a policy for voluntary engagement, including minorities and public health.

### **Individual and contextual factors for volunteering in Norway**

This chapter discusses volunteering performed by marginalised women and how they experience the effect of voluntary participation on their quality of life. Second, the chapter discusses the contextual capabilities of their participation in volunteering. In the following, we will describe some individual characteristics of this group of volunteers in Norway, building on the recent research on the voluntary sector in Norway. To start with, the establishment of Neighbourhood Mothers has a background in the fact that ethnic marginalised women with limited Norwegian language skills are among the least active participants in the voluntary sector in Norway. Voluntary participation in Norway is extensive compared to most other countries, and most of the voluntary work is performed within formalised organisations. Thus, compared to many other countries, voluntary work in Norway is characterised by a high degree of formalisation, even though the scope of voluntary efforts carried out outside the framework of an organisation is increasing (Enjolras & Strømsnes, 2018). Seventy-eight per cent of the population in Norway is a member of at least one organisation, and 48 per cent of the population is a member of at least two organisations (Statistics Norway's Living Conditions Survey, 2020). The main areas where voluntary work is performed in Norway are culture and sports, especially in leisure activities concerning children and youth (Enjolras & Strømsnes, 2018). In general, the typical volunteer in Norway is a (native-born) married man between 35 and 49 years, with children in the household, high education and high household income, doing voluntary work in a sports organisation (Folkestad et al., 2015). Research investigating the immigrant population's participation in voluntary organisations shows that, in general, half as many of the immigrant population as in the rest of the people engage in one way or another in a voluntary organisation (Eimhjellen & Arnesen, 2018). Thus, being an adult or older woman with lower education, newly arrived or a short period of residency in the local community, and no or little knowledge of Norwegian language skills, gives a significantly lower probability of doing voluntary work in a voluntary organisation in Norway.

When it comes to individual resources with significance for whether one participates in voluntary work, the question of motivation is also relevant.

Wollebæk et al. (2015) find that the experience of the benefit of doing voluntary work, and the satisfaction and feelings of belonging to a voluntary organisation, are important for the individual's willingness to continue as a volunteer. The volunteer's life phase is also crucial for motivation, such as the fact that full-time workers may lack time to do voluntary work or that health conditions prevent many older people from participating.

The importance of social networks is strongly emphasised when it comes to conditions for voluntary participation. Most voluntary work comes about because someone has asked them, or they hear about the possibility of participation from someone they know. Therefore, young people and newcomers to the community more often state that they have not been asked (Wollebæk et al., 2015).

Finally, when it comes to research on the contextual conditions for voluntary participation in Norway, there is less research available compared to research on individual conditions. Research on voluntary work in Norway has shown that a special feature of Norwegian organisational life in recent times is that voluntary engagement has been almost the same in sparsely populated areas as in densely populated areas (Wollebæk & Sivesind, 2010, p. 52). However, the tendency in these numbers is that there is an increasing difference between urban and rural contexts where the decline has taken place in the urban and densely populated areas. The national survey of voluntary work in 2004 shows that residence in sparsely populated areas has become a variable that positively affects the probability of voluntary work (Wollebæk & Sivesind, 2010). More individuals in urban contexts claim they have not been asked to participate in voluntary work (30 per cent in big cities and 20 per cent in sparsely populated areas). The interpretation of this is that local communities where everyone knows each other have a more stable organisational community than communities with weaker social ties. Although there is a more extensive and more diverse offer of voluntary organisations in large cities, looser social relations may affect the probability of being asked to participate in volunteering. In larger cities, there are also several competing cultural activities such as cinemas, theatres, gyms, restaurants, concerts etc., that may replace the forms of social interaction central to many people's motivation to participate in a voluntary organisation.

### **Method and data collection**

The empirical data in this chapter stem from a qualitative case study on the Neighbourhood Mothers initiative in Norway. The data material is collected from Kvam in Western Norway county and the organisation's head office in Oslo. The case study is examined using semi-structured interviews on



Zoom (video and audio-conferencing). In Kvam, interviews were conducted with nine neighbourhood mothers, the project coordinator, twelve representatives from the local health and welfare services, stakeholders from the voluntary sector involvement in the NM initiative and the mayor in Kvam. Participatory observation was conducted at two NM online dialogue meetings with the neighbourhood mothers and the project coordinator. In Oslo, the data consists of ten interviews with representatives from the local health and welfare services and stakeholders from the voluntary sector involvement in the NM initiative in one of the boroughs, including the project coordinator and five neighbourhood mothers from the same borough. There was also participatory observation at two digital meetings with the neighbourhood mothers and two digital meetings with the NM Norway organisation board. Besides this, data on the NM initiative in Oslo and Kvam was drawn from several inquiries, including the organisation's annual reports, newspaper articles and self-reported publicly accessible websites.

In this chapter, our primary focus is on the NM initiative in Kvam. While the context of Oslo is more familiar through several former research projects on immigrants' participation in voluntary organisations in Oslo (Ødegård, 2010; Ødegård et al., 2014; Eimhjellen et al., 2021), there are no similar studies performed in Kvam. Therefore, the data for this chapter builds primarily on the data collection from Kvam.

### Volunteering in Kvam

In Norway, only 20 per cent of the municipalities have developed a policy for the voluntary sector (Selle et al., 2018). Both Kvam and Oslo are among these municipalities. In Kvam, the local government refers to a high level of voluntary engagement both outside and within the framework of voluntary organisations. They have mapped the voluntary sector and registered 180 member-based organisations. These organisations operate in various fields such as sports and culture, humanitarian work and welfare, and activities for children and youths in the local community. In the action plan for public health in Kvam, the local government highlights engagement in voluntary organisations as important. Engagement in voluntary organisations is also highlighted as an important arena for integration in Kvam municipality's *Strategy for Migrant Integration (2020–25)*. The strategy states that:

Through consistent participation in civil society, the volunteers gain valuable knowledge and experience about local democratic processes. This implies that participation through voluntary organisations and activities can work as a 'school in democracy'. The organisations are also political actors that can influence local political processes. If certain groups participate less in the local

community over time, there may be consequences to those groups' sense of belonging and trust in the local community. This could result in reduced participation in other areas such as education and employment and increased social inequality.

(Strategy for Migrant Integration, 2020–25, p. 19)

Referring to former research on integration and the voluntary sector in the largest cities in Norway (Ødegård et al., 2014), the action plan of Kvam highlights both the political ambition of mobilising the voluntary sector in the municipality's effort to achieve better integration of migrants, as well as the attempt to implement a linking social capital where the municipality establishes collaboration with the voluntary organisations and helps to empower marginalised groups (Ødegård et al., 2014). The mayor also reflects this political ambition in Kvam on the NM initiative's anticipated impact:

We hope that becoming a neighbourhood mother and training in democratic processes could help people get more involved in society, where they can participate more actively and get a better understanding of local social structures. In addition, I am hoping that the NM initiative can give these groups a boost in their interest in politics. There are a few people from other countries that run for office, but none have been elected.

The public health and social services informants also express a hopeful attitude towards the future collaboration between the services and the NM. The public professionals underline that the neighbourhood mothers can contribute with the necessary knowledge to improve public services. As one of the informants illustrates: 'Yes, this is a totally new form of public service collaboration with volunteers. I think it is a great addition to working towards integration of migrants, as the public sector is just not that good at it. We have realised that we, as providers of public services, need the neighbourhood mothers as much as they need us' (family therapist at The Family Centre).

All the health and social services informants share common challenges reaching out to ethnic marginalised groups regarding language, cultural barriers and misunderstandings. They all seem to acknowledge that NM as a voluntary organisation is a good platform for reaching out to citizens they have difficulties in reaching. One of the informants explained: 'The volunteering neighbourhood mothers are resources that we can listen to, contributing with knowledge regarding ethnic minorities in various projects in the municipality. They have become representatives of their ethnic groups, helping us as public service providers to reach those groups' (family counsellor at The Family Centre). In other words, the municipality of Kvam focuses on empowering migrant women through engagement in voluntary organisations, both through the municipality's voluntary policy,

integration policy and action plan for public health. This work is further reflected in our interviews with public employees within various service institutions. As a factor in Kvam, a rural context, this does not differ from the corresponding work that has been done over several years in Oslo, where the NM was first established.

### *Work inclusion through social networks*

Several of the informants underline how access to paid work in a small community largely depends on inclusion in social networks. Furthermore, there was broad consensus among the informants on the difficulties of building a social network in the local community. A recent survey conducted for The Strategy for Migrant Integration in Kvam also points to access to paid work and difficulties of building a social network as two of the main challenges regarding migrant integration in Kvam (Strategy for Migrant Integration, 2020–25, p. 19). Several of the informants in our case study also point to an underrepresentation of migrants in voluntary organisations and activities as a reason for the social marginalisation. The connection of (membership) participation in a formal voluntary organisation, inclusion in social networks and access to paid work is highlighted by one of the informants:

First, there are few jobs here, so there is competition for every job. It's hard for everyone to get employment, but it's even harder if you don't speak the language well. A working environment is important for building a network to get to know people. If a colleague invites you to go for a bike ride or something, you get the opportunity to get to know them. If you don't have that arena, you don't get a network. Also, a survey has recently been sent out to all the voluntary organisations regarding the new Strategy for Migrant Integration here in Kvam. They all say they have integration goals, but when we ask if they have members from non-western countries, they say no ... I have many strange experiences with volunteer organisations that say that 'THEY [referring to the migrants] have to get integrated' and so on. But how do you do that when you don't get taken in?

(general manager at The Centre for Volunteering)

This is underpinned by one of the neighbourhood mothers: 'I am a job seeker, and I have been applying for many jobs. And you know, this is a small rural community. All the Norwegians here know each other. They went to school together or worked together, you know, from childhood. So they know each other, and that makes it easier for them to get jobs' (neighbourhood mother).

Social networks are also highlighted by the general manager at The Centre for Volunteering as more crucial for work inclusion in a smaller community than in the larger city:

For example, you have the case of mothers not taking their children to birthday parties, which leads to the other parents don't get to know their child, and it's maybe the man of that house who years later is going to be offering internships or a work position to some of these children, right. So, if the other parents don't get to know their children, it could have consequences later in life, especially in rural areas. It's maybe not as crucial in the larger cities, but here it is.

On questions regarding employment opportunities in Kvam, the informants from the health and welfare services all agree that the NM initiative can lead to greater employment opportunities for the women involved. As one informant highlights: 'NM has become visible through their Facebook group, advertisements, and articles in our local newspaper, and so they are seen as resources to the whole community. Which could make a difference when applying for jobs' (family counsellor at The Family Centre). And as another informant states: 'They get a lot of practice speaking Norwegian, and I guess it broadens their networks rather quickly too, making it easier for them to get jobs' (youth social worker). These informants highlight that the ethnic marginalised women receive individual resources by participating in the local voluntary organisation that contribute to strengthen their 'capabilities' both in the form of material living and insecurity (getting a job), education (learning the language) and social connections and relationships (getting to know the local citizens) (Stiglitz et al., 2009).

Several neighbourhood mothers also share the hopes for better social inclusion and employment opportunities by gaining more knowledge about society and getting to know several professionals throughout the NM education programme. Thus, they also point to possible improved capabilities in social connections, less insecurity both in a psychological and material form, and health (well-being). As one of them shared:

I've noticed that more people are coming up to me when I'm out walking to work, for example, after becoming an NM. They say hi and smile at me because they know who I am after being in the local newspaper. Earlier, one of my colleagues wouldn't talk to me because she was a little scared of me. One day, after I was in the paper, she passed me with her car and smiled and waved at me. She wanted to have a chat and said that she had read about me in the paper. Then she opened up and told a bit of herself too. That was very nice.

(neighbourhood mother)

The same experience is shared by another neighbourhood mother who also experienced the local citizens' positive attitude towards her when they learned that the woman is engaged in the voluntary organisation of NM: 'After being interviewed and pictured in the paper, several people have come up to me at school and told me they've read about me, complimented what I said. That's been very nice' (neighbourhood mother). In other words, participation leads

to both a more positive attitude and increased trust, and furthermore, better social inclusion in the local community. It also seems that the local newspaper is an important information channel for this trust to be established. The local population's reference to the local newspaper seems more central in Kvam and is not similarly emphasised by informants in Oslo.

### *Social arenas and local attitudes*

The characteristics of the context of Kvam versus Oslo, for example in the form of what kind of social arenas exist in the different local communities, are an essential factor for how local citizens view and value the migrant women's participation in NM. In a larger city, a comprehensive and diverse cultural service exists where citizens participate socially and connect, whereas in Kvam the voluntary organisations seem to be more important as arenas for social engagement:

Like everyone else in Kvam, we meet on the football pitch or the cross-country skiing tracks. We have very few informal meeting places. There are almost no cafes, and the few we have are only open during the day. And then you have the hotels, which the men are using. They hang out, drink coffee, but the women [referring to the migrants] don't really have any meeting places .

(general manager at The Centre for Volunteering)

This informant reflects on the characteristics of the social arenas in Kvam. There are very few informal, non-organised social arenas, and most social engagement happens within the frame of a formal voluntary organisation. In line with research on the voluntary sector in Norway, this is the very characteristic of the so-called 'membership model' as the typical form of civic engagement in all the Nordic countries (Selle, 2013; Henriksen et al., 2019). This is also in line with research that points to an increasing difference between city and country when it comes to voluntary work, and that participation in voluntary organisations is more important in rural areas than in large cities, where social interaction also takes place in other arenas. In other words, this indicates that voluntary organisations are more important for migrants to be socially included, but also for the opportunity to get a job and to be met with a smile and not scepticism from the local population. All these three factors have a great impact on the quality of life of every human being.

The lack of meeting places for social interaction in the local community is also strongly emphasised as an explanation for less interaction between different ethnic groups. One of the informants highlights this when asked if it was easy to get to know people when she moved here, answering: 'No, it wasn't easy. I have gotten to know a few other migrants like me. I went to the "language cafe" a few times and took Norwegian classes, but there were

no Norwegians there, only women from other countries' (neighbourhood mother). The lack of social arenas in the local community for the ethnic marginalised women is also reflected on by several of the neighbourhood mothers. When asked whether they have a meeting place outside the home, one neighbourhood mother replies: 'No. We have a mosque, but it's only the men that go there. It's because the mosque is only one tiny room. There's not enough space, and men and women aren't supposed to be there together. So, a lot of women just stay at home with the kids' (neighbourhood mother). This informant emphasises that participation in the NM organisation is important not only for building trust in the majority population but also for bonding social trust with other minority groups. In Kvam, the NM as a voluntary organisation also functions as an essential social arena for different migrant groups, and NM plays a central role, like the mosque, as a place where newcomers meet their first and often only acquaintances. Lack of social communities and friendships is one of the strongest variables that affects a person's quality of life. While in Oslo many religious communities and minority organisations can fill this need for newcomers, NM is one of very few such arenas in Kvam.

### *Recruitment to voluntary work*

The most important factor for becoming a volunteer and being included in a voluntary organisation in Norway is to be invited to join by someone you know (Wollebæk et al., 2015), as illustrated by the coordinator at The Centre for Volunteering:

I imagine that in smaller communities it is easier to get an overview of the people living here and to know who to ask to volunteer. I can just call someone, introduce myself, and they'll know who I am. As mentioned, many of them I know privately too, you know. When we know each other, it's easier to ask for voluntary participation.

This form of recruitment process also depends on social ties. It illustrates how it is difficult to be included when arriving as a newcomer and perhaps not communicating due to the lack of language skills. Therefore, newcomers to the community more often state that they have not been asked (Wollebæk et al., 2015), as reflected upon by another informant:

In rural municipalities, you could say that it's easier to reach some of the migrant groups. However, in some rural areas, you can see that work migrants become very isolated. They're not in contact with any organisation or public service other than schools or kindergartens, if they have kids. Other than that, they have no point of contact with the municipality and don't get language training. And there are a lot of these in rural municipalities.

(senior adviser, Centre of Equality (KUN))

Whether one arrives as a refugee, for work or through family reunion, these groups are met with different integration policies. For example, immigrants arriving as refugees in Norway go through the mandatory ‘introduction programme’, with an emphasis on language training and social studies. In contrast, there is no such programme for working immigrants, which is the largest immigration group in Norway (and in the local community of Kvam). As a result, very few in this group receive any public offer of language and social training. As highlighted by the general manager at The Centre for Volunteering: ‘We [The Centre for Volunteering] know the refugees the best. They arrive through the refugee service and adult education training, so we get to know them at these arenas. So, it sort of comes down to our [The Centre for Volunteering] recruitment through those networks and arenas’.

Only one neighbourhood mother has been part of a voluntary organisation before, the Red Cross. The others say they have never been asked or know what the different organisations do. As one of the neighbourhood mothers explains: ‘No, none of the voluntary organisations has ever asked me to join because they don’t know me. I know they have a few groups at the Centre for Volunteering, but I don’t know what they do, that’s why I haven’t joined’.

The mayor argued that the effort and integration strategies of some of the other voluntary organisations in the local community of Kvam were not too successful: ‘I think many of the voluntary organisations could be more active in their efforts to try and recruit migrants. I think we still have a job to do when it comes to recruiting migrants here in Kvam.’ As one of the informants explains:

The Norwegian Women’s Public Health Association (Norske Kvinners Sanitetsforening) and the Norwegian Society of Rural Women (Norges Bygdekvinne­lag) are usually represented in district municipalities. NKS, for instance, may have as many as six or seven divisions in a single town. They’re not trying to be excluding but are often perceived as somewhat excluding. Very few women from ethnic minorities are represented ... When we organise seminars with these organisations, they often say that they don’t know how to recruit or reach out to ethnic minorities.

(senior adviser, Centre of Equality (KUN))

The coordinator for volunteering argues that one of the excluding factors is that there is an economical fee to become a member in many of these organisations: ‘Maybe 600–700 kroner a year to be part of the women’s and family association, and then they also go on excursions or trips that also cost a lot. If you are short on money, it’s holding people back.’

Individual factors, such as gender, minority background and the lack of language skills are relevant factors that decrease the possibility of being included in a voluntary organisation. In addition to this, for the ethnic

marginalised women, income also seems to be a factor in participating, as most organisations are member-based and require an annual fee. This illustrates the interconnection of individual and contextual factors in the capability approach of Amartya Sen (1979), where the economy of the individual becomes an obstacle because of the forms, for example membership-based voluntary organisations, and the lack of multiple social arenas that exist in the context.

### *Motivation for volunteering*

When it comes to individual resources with significance for whether one participates in voluntary work, motivation is also relevant. When asked in the interviews what the coordinator might have said to make them choose to become volunteering neighbourhood mothers, several of the women highlighted the notion of *helping others* and *building community* as the main reasons. As one of the neighbourhood mothers answered:

The coordinator sent me a video of NM in Oslo and asked me if I wanted to join. I watched the video and saw that I could join the effort to help others and society in general. I really wanted to become a neighbourhood mother ... because then we become useful to one another and to society. Also, I want to give back what I have received. I have received safety, protection, education and work here in Norway, and my kids are safe here. So you want to give back to those who have given to you. We are now going to be useful to this society and make it even better.

Motives and values regarding helping other women and especially ethnic marginalised groups was also highlighted as one of the main motivation factors for becoming neighbourhood mothers. As one of the neighbourhood mothers stated: 'It is exactly like the saying, When women thrive, all of society benefits':

Therefore, I said yes to becoming a neighbourhood mother right away because I'm rooting for women who stand together. Helping and supporting each other through joys and sorrows, through everything. Because it's needed. As women we must support each other. When I see another woman going through something, who's feeling bad, I get hurt too. Even if it isn't me hurting. I always think, 'imagine if it was me', so I like helping other women.

Several benefits of becoming volunteering neighbourhood mothers are also highlighted as motivation factors, such as gaining knowledge and language training: 'When the coordinator asked me if I wanted to join the NM training programme, I thought I should join to practice my Norwegian, build my knowledge and learn more about existing services' (neighbourhood mother). Others highlighted that their motivation was about becoming part of a



social network. Wollebæk et al. (2015) state that satisfaction and feelings of belonging to a voluntary organisation are important for the individual's motivation and willingness to continue as a volunteer. This is underlined by several of the neighbourhood mothers, exemplified by one of them:

What motivated me to become a neighbourhood mother was arranging activities for women here in Kvam. I want women to have a good time here, to enjoy themselves .... I'm going to discuss this with the other neighbourhood mothers and see what we can do. We haven't initiated any activities yet because we have just completed the NM training programme, but we're going to learn from the neighbourhood mothers in Oslo.

### Conclusion

The case study has found that inclusion in a voluntary organisation has a huge impact on ethnic marginalised women's experienced well-being and quality of life. Social belonging is a factor that most of our informants emphasise as a primary motive for wanting to become volunteers and members of the Neighbourhood Mothers voluntary organisation. Individual resources such as gender, background and language skills are known factors in voluntary research that contribute to exclusion. Our informants point out that personal economy also comes into play when it comes to member-based voluntary organisations. The study suggests that all the factors mentioned are getting stronger in rural areas where the few, and often member-based voluntary organisations, are the most important arenas for social participation and leisure activities. In urban areas there is a greater diversity of voluntary organisations and associations, including many minority organisations and several other cultural offerings that fill the need for socialisation. Therefore, organisations do not become the only central arenas for social inclusion. These findings underscore the interconnection of individual resources and characteristics in different contexts found in Sen's capability approach. The individual resources, such as gender, minority background, language skills and personal economy, are relevant exclusion mechanisms in both contexts. However, the contextual factors are very different, such as the number of voluntary organisations, types of organisations, the development of a policy of volunteering, integration and public health, and the ability and awareness in the organisations to include marginalised citizens. There are more marginalised minorities in Oslo than in Kvam. Still, the voluntary organisation seems to be a more important arena for social inclusion in rural areas than in cities, which is crucial for people's experienced well-being and quality of life.

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# A comparison of health-related quality of life in rural and metropolitan areas of Australia: the contribution of sports and physical activity

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## Introduction

People can be physically active in their leisure time in many different ways, ranging from organised sports such as football and tennis to informal physical activity (PA) such as walking. In addition to the physical health benefits of participation, there is increasing evidence of broader health benefits (HR quality of life) of participation in organised community-level sports, specifically social and mental health benefits (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b; Vella et al., 2015; Jenkin et al., 2018). Some of these benefits are unique to sports, given the team- and club-based, social nature of participation (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b). Further, the specific health benefits of participation in community-level sports can differ across the lifespan (Vella et al., 2015; Jenkin et al., 2018; Mayolas-Pi et al., 2021).

Also, there are different patterns of participation in sports and physical activity among metropolitan residents compared to residents in non-metropolitan (in Australia generally termed ‘rural and regional’) areas (Eime, Charity et al., 2015). Participation in club-based community sports is often more prevalent among people living in rural and regional areas compared to metropolitan areas (Eime et al., 2016). Sports, in that regard, seems to play a particularly important role in regional Australia as a space for collective action around social and physical benefits that are delivered through participation in sports. This is further confirmed by various researchers (Spaaij, 2009; Tonts & Atherley, 2010; Mooney et al., 2012), who highlight the centrality of community sports in these areas.

There are many physical, social and mental health benefits of participation in regular leisure-time physical activity. Participation in regular physical activity can play a positive role in preventing the development of a range of chronic diseases (e.g. cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, hypertension, obesity, depression and osteoporosis) and premature death (Warburton et al., 2006).

Being physically active with others can also improve social health (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b; Howie et al., 2020). These social benefits can be related to a number of different social interactions and relationships involving parents, siblings, extended family, friends, teammates and other peers (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b; Howie et al., 2020). Further, there is evidence that greater social support for older adults to be physically active increases their likelihood of being active, especially when that social support comes from family members (Lindsay Smith et al., 2017). Being a member of community groups that offer both social and physical activities can also improve social well-being of older adults (Lindsay-Smith et al., 2018). It can be argued that in the wider context of society at large, the not-for-profit sports sector continues to be an important civil society actor. Sporting clubs are hubs for community connection, and sports governing bodies plan for and (can) initiate programmes that benefit communities at large.

Physical activity can help to promote mental health and well-being, as well as being helpful to the prevention and treatment of common mental health issues like depression and anxiety, and can reduce stress and distress (Saxena et al., 2005; Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b).

There is research evidence that health benefits can differ according to the type of activity undertaken. Specifically, leisure-time physical activity is associated with improved mental health compared to other domains like work-related physical activity (White et al., 2017). It has also been suggested that choice of activity and having fun is a contributing factor to improved health (Eime et al., 2013a). In particular, participation in sports has been shown to contribute considerably to overall leisure-time physical activity at health-enhancing levels (Eime, Harvey et al., 2015). In the present study, we consider two contextual dimensions of sports and leisure-time physical activity: *setting* (organised versus informal); and *mode* (team versus individual).

The health benefits of participation in sports also vary across different age groups (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b; Jenkin et al., 2017; Vella et al., 2017; Bedard et al., 2020; Harlow et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Panza et al., 2020). The following sections summarise literature on the specific health benefits of participation in sports, for children, adolescents, adults and older adults.

### Health benefits of participation in sports for children and adolescents

For young children, participation in sports can be associated with the development of a range of personal, social, mental and physical skills and health benefits, many of which are expressed in what is known as Positive Youth

Development (Eime et al., 2013b; Neely & Holt, 2014; Holt et al., 2017; Bedard et al., 2020; Harlow et al., 2020). A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sports for children and adolescents demonstrated a long list of potential benefits and highlighted that the main benefits were improved self-esteem, greater social interaction and fewer depressive symptoms (Eime et al., 2013b). Other research has highlighted benefits including the development of social skills such as social competence and social adjustment, relationship and engagement skills such as making friends, communicating, cooperation, sharing, helping others, solving problems, and empathy, as well as learning to follow social conventions such as complying with rules and trying not to repeat negative behaviours (Bedard et al., 2020; Harlow et al., 2020). Other positive psychological outcomes include behaviours relating to responsibility, courage, respect, self-discipline and independence. Also, there can be fewer emotional problems such as feeling worried or anxious, withdrawn or depressed (Harlow et al., 2020; Panza et al., 2020).

There is much literature describing the Positive Youth Development paradigm, based on the notion that young people have resources to be developed rather than problems to be solved (Holt et al., 2017). Individuals within particular social environments can build strengths and foster positive development. For example, young people can develop self-efficacy, respect for societal and cultural norms, and experience positive exchanges with peers and community members (Holt et al., 2017). Within the sporting context, this can occur through interactions with adults such as coaches and parents as well as development of peer relationships with their team members. These outcomes can be described within the personal domain, social domain or physical domain. In the personal domain, sports can promote development of positive self-perceptions such as confidence and self-esteem, academic benefits through learning to persevere and work hard, and attitudes and practices including respect for others, independence, taking personal responsibility, maintaining a positive attitude, problem-solving skills, stress management and goal setting. Within the social domain, developments can include teamwork, leadership and communication skills. Within the physical domain, developments can include fundamental movement skills and skills for living a healthy life (Holt et al., 2017).

### **Health benefits of participation in sports for adults and older adults**

Compared to children and adolescents, there is less literature on the health benefits of participation in sports by adults. However, there are some similar

trends. A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sports for adults identified a long list of potential benefits, the main themes being enhanced well-being and reduced distress and stress (Eime et al., 2013a). In a more recent review of the social and psychological health outcomes of team sports, the most frequently reported participant outcomes were emotional social support, sense of belonging, higher self-esteem, social networks and social interaction (Andersen et al., 2018). Adults in other studies have reported perceived benefits of participation in sports including improvement or maintenance of health and well-being, improvement in physical performance and appearance, the loss or maintenance of weight, and getting together and meeting other people (Oliveira-Brochado et al., 2017).

For older adults, participation in sports has been associated with a range of positive health outcomes and several studies have highlighted that participation can be a vehicle to negotiate the negative stereotypes of ageing (Jenkin et al., 2017; Chan Hyung Kim et al., 2020). Participation in sports by older adults has been associated with improved life satisfaction; lower depression, anxiety and stress; positive mood state; and other personal psychological outcomes such as personal empowerment, self-confidence and self-esteem (Chan Hyung Kim et al., 2020). Participation in sports by older adults has been shown to be positively associated with general happiness, social capital including feelings of trust and safety, and neighbourhood connections (Kim et al., 2020). Similarly, Jenkins et al. reported that older adults often participate in sports to develop and maintain community engagement, foster social connections, decrease social loneliness and reinforce their social identity (Jenkin et al., 2017). Further, for older adults, health is often a main motivation for participation, in relation to sports enhancing their physical, mental and/or social health (Jenkin et al., 2017). A systematic review of the psychosocial outcomes of older adults' participation in sports revealed that participation in sports influences outcomes specific to ageing, including cognitive/perceptual, emotional, social and motivational outcomes (Gayman et al., 2017).

### **Sports and physical activity and health-related quality of life**

While there are a wide range of potential benefits of participation in sports which can differ across the lifespan, some studies have specifically investigated the relationship between participation in sports and physical activity and health-related quality of life (Eime et al., 2010; Snyder et al., 2010; Eime et al., 2014; Vella et al., 2014; Casey et al., 2016; Lindsay-Smith et al., 2019; Moeijes et al., 2019). There is literature highlighting the different health benefits across the lifespan according to different age groups. Further there is an abundance of literature highlighting the fact

that participation in sports is much higher for males than it is for females (Eime et al., 2016, 2019). However, to our knowledge there is no literature describing any differences in the broad health outcomes of participation by gender.

A recent study of children measured HR quality of life as defined by self-perceived enjoyment and satisfaction with one's personal health situation (Moeijes et al., 2019). In this study, children who were highly engaged in sports participation had better HR quality of life than those who were less active through sports and non-members of sports clubs (Moeijes et al., 2019). Similarly, a longitudinal study investigated the association between participation in sports for children and their parent-reported HR quality of life (Vella et al., 2014). Children who played sports continually between the ages of 8 and 10 years had greater parent-reported HR quality of life at age 10 compared to those who did not participate in sports, or those who started playing sports after the age of 8 (Vella et al., 2014). Further, in a recent study on the associations between frequency of participation in sports and HR quality of life in high-school athletes, more hours per week of participation in sports was significantly associated with lower depressive symptoms (Gagliardi et al., 2020).

For adults, a study investigated HR quality of life and life satisfaction of women participating in club-based sports compared to women engaged in gym-based activities or walking (Eime et al., 2009). These studies supported the concept that being physically active in a socially engaged manner can contribute to improved social and mental health and life satisfaction (Eime et al., 2009, 2013a).

A study of older adults who were involved with community groups reported that those whose group activities included physical activity had better HR quality of life a year later than those in a non-physical activity social group (Lindsay-Smith et al., 2019). The older adults spoke of the social aspects of the physical activity programmes as the main motivator to remaining active (Lindsay-Smith et al., 2019).

The Health through Sport conceptual model depicts the relationship between determinants driving participation in sports and the reported psychological and social health benefits of participation. The model links components of HR quality of life – physical, psychological and social – to participation in sports, from the informal and individual forms through to organised and team sports (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b). Through these systematic reviews and development of the conceptual model, the critical importance of the social nature of many sports is highlighted (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b). Any type of activity can lead to physical health benefits; however, it is the organised and team-based nature of certain sports activities that can provide improved psychological and social health benefits



above those provided by individual or informal sports activities (Eime et al., 2013a, 2013b). These conclusions have been further supported by more recent research which reported that team sports for adults was associated with improved social and psychological health compared to individually-based sports (Andersen et al., 2018).

### Role of sports in rural and regional areas

Participation in sports is consistently reported as being higher in rural and regional areas, and it is often conjectured that this is due to the cultural and social identity of sports in rural and regional areas (Eime et al., 2018), and that rural and regional areas generally have traditional sports but not the larger range of choice of leisure-time activities evident in metropolitan areas (Eime et al., 2016). Further, there is extensive research highlighting the central community role that sports can play in rural and regional areas (Tonts, 2005; Spaaij, 2009; Mooney et al., 2012). Sports has been described as the glue that holds rural and regional communities together (Spaaij, 2009). In these communities, local sports clubs are vital community hubs that foster social cohesion, local and regional identities and a shared focus and outlet (Spaaij, 2009). Similarly, sports in rural and regional Australia has been described as an essential ingredient in the socio-cultural identity of communities (Tonts & Atherley, 2010). The identity of place and community is formed through diverse local and regional social interactions, practices and memories. Central to this are the symbolic community boundaries that sports creates, which provide a sense of difference with neighbouring towns, and which define and develop local identities (Tonts & Atherley, 2010). As noted earlier, this makes sports clubs and the federations that manage their competitions important civil society actors.

Mooney et al. (2012) also discuss the social identities of rural and regional adolescents in the context of participation in sports. In rural and regional areas there are fewer sports and organised or structured physical activities for girls to choose to play, and this is highlighted by the title of the paper 'You're no-one if you're not a netball girl' and 'netball is just what you do in a small town if you are a girl' (Mooney et al., 2012, p. 34). Australian football and netball are the main winter sports in these communities and nearly everyone from the community attends 'footy' and netball on the weekend – it is their main social engagement and avenue for social networking, and it is seen as the lifeblood of the community (Mooney et al., 2012). However, these sports clubs can be difficult for some with lesser sports-specific skills to be accepted and able to get a place on a team, and so they can feel left out of both the sports and the community spirit (Mooney et al., 2012).

The role of sports in rural and regional communities in the provision of social infrastructure and social identity is not unique to Australia, with

similar observations being made in other countries including Canada (Rich, 2021) and in China, with the provision of community sports being seen as promoting both health and inclusion (Chen & Liu, 2020). Participation in sports is beneficial, not only for individuals but for rural communities too, as it enhances individuals' social well-being and facilitates social inclusion (Chen & Liu, 2020). More broadly, participation in sports contributes to the accumulation of social capital, and as such, sports is a valuable asset with positive impacts in regional communities (Biernat et al., 2020).

Many studies have investigated HR quality of life and participation in sports, but generally have not specifically identified individuals' residential location and therefore have not examined differences in HR quality of life of sports participants in rural and regional areas compared to metropolitan cities. However, one study of adolescent girls in rural and regional areas within Victoria, Australia (Casey et al., 2016) found that girls who spent high amounts of time playing sports had higher values of HR quality of life than girls who spent high amounts of time on the computer or playing video games (Casey et al., 2016). In the wider context of this book, we hope to contribute to the body of knowledge about the role that sports organisations in rural or regional areas can play as places of collective (positive) action in communities.

The goal of the present study was to investigate the contribution of participation in sports and physical activity to the HR quality of life of individuals before and during COVID-19, with a particular focus on differences between residents in regional and rural areas and those in metropolitan areas. Specifically, the aims of the study were to compare levels of HR quality of life in metropolitan areas with levels in rural and regional areas of Australia, and to investigate the relationships between HR quality of life and participation in sports and physical activity, across age and gender.

The specific research questions explored (1) What is the HR quality of life of individuals in rural and regional areas compared to metropolitan areas? (2) How does the HR quality of life of individuals differ according to type of activity participated in? (3) How do the sports and physical activity profiles and health outcomes of individuals align to the Health through Sport conceptual model?

## Methods

Data for this study was collected via an online survey conducted in Australia between 6 May and 23 June 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated stresses and restrictions. Recruitment of study participants was primarily facilitated through research partnerships with Australian National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) of popular sports, including bowls, golf, tennis, cricket and Australian football. All participants registered in the 2019 and/or

2020 seasons or calendar years, and aged 13–85 years, were invited to participate in the study. A second convenience sample was recruited using snowball sampling methods initiated through a range of media and non-sports community organisations with access to a range of networks more representative of the population as a whole. While it was expected that this second sample would include some registered sports participants, the aim was to recruit comparison samples who were not registered sports participants, including participants in informal sports or physical activity, and non-participants in any form of sports or physical activity. As a result of the modes of recruitment, and the difficulty of engaging potential inactive respondents to complete a survey largely focused on sports and physical activity, the resulting sample was heavily weighted towards sports and physical activity participants.

The survey questions included:

- Socio-demographic characteristics – date of birth, gender, residential postcode, individual and household characteristics;
- Sports and physical activity profile – sports and other physical activities engaged in, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and questions about settings of participation (organised, i.e. registered, informal), motivations, frequency and duration of activity; all activities were also categorised as team or individual mode;
- Quality of life – self-report indicators of general, physical and mental health, social capital, well-being and life satisfaction. Items were derived or adapted from:
  - SF-36 and SF-12 instruments: health-related quality of life
  - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW): feelings of loneliness, worry (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012)
  - Ohio State University Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) and Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile (RASP): resiliency (Hurtes & Allen, 2001)
  - British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) (Powdthavee, 2008) and Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH); life satisfaction (Women’s Health Australia, 2008)
  - Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) General Social Survey: indicators of social well-being and social capital – connectedness, access to support and perceptions of trust and safety (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012)
  - AIHW indicators of social and emotional well-being: close friendship, attachment to peers, communication with parents (Women’s Health Australia, 2008)

## Analysis

In this chapter we report on an analysis of the five self-reported HR quality of life indicators described in [Table 17.1](#). These represented five aspects of HR quality of life as perceived at the time of the survey, during the COVID-19

**Table 17.1** Health-related quality of life indicators.

Aspect	Scale	Indicator
General health	1–5	5-point Likert item: 1=Poor, 5=Excellent
Physical health	1–5	5-point Likert item: 1=Poor, 5=Excellent
Mental health	1–5	5-point Likert item: 1=Poor, 5=Excellent
Well-being	1–5	Mean of 14 items: 1=Never, 5=All the time (negative items reverse scored)
Life satisfaction	1–10	10-point numerical scale: 1=Least satisfied, 10=Most satisfied

pandemic and the associated stresses and restrictions. Two types of statistical analysis were conducted. First, independent samples t-tests were used to compare the five indicators for residents of metropolitan areas and rural and regional areas. Second, for each of the five indicators, a series of four 2-factor analyses of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The first factor in all analyses was ‘area’, and the second factor was four other characteristics of the respondents, analysed one at a time. The purpose was to examine the effect of area after controlling in turn for each of the other potential key determinants of HR quality of life:

- gender;
- age (adult, adolescent);
- sports/physical activity setting (organised only, informal only, both organised and informal, neither);
- sports/physical activity mode (team only, individual only, both team and individual, neither).

The sports and physical activity setting and mode variables were derived from questions framed in terms of annual registrations and activity within the previous twelve months, and so they reflected activities prior to the restrictions of the COVID-19 period.

Each of the  $5 \times 4 = 20$  2-factor ANOVAs included three sources of variation in the HR quality of life indicator:

1. The ‘main effect’ of area, representing differences between the two areas after adjustment for the effects of each respondent characteristic in turn.
2. The ‘main effect’ of the respondent characteristic, which is of interest in its own right; in particular, the last two characteristics are of interest with regard to the Health through Sport conceptual model.
3. The interaction between area and the respondent characteristic, which indicates whether each characteristic acts as a modifier for the relationship between area and the HR quality of life indicator, i.e. whether the relationship between area and the HR quality of life indicator is different for the subpopulations defined by the categories of each characteristic.

## Results

After data checking and cleaning, data from 5,491 survey respondents was analysed, 3,569 from metropolitan areas and 1,922 from rural and regional areas. Table 17.2 shows, for each of the respondent characteristics, the response profiles (percentages in each category) for metropolitan areas and rural and regional areas. The results of chi-square tests indicate differences in the profiles of three of the four characteristics, which indicates that when investigating area effects, controlling for these variables was warranted.

**Table 17.2** Respondent characteristics: summary statistics by geographical area.

Characteristics	Geographical area				p-value <sup>1</sup>
	Metro		Regional and rural		
	N	%	N	%	
Total sample	3,569		1,922		
Gender	3,569		1,922		<.001
Female		63.1		56.0	
Male		36.3		43.7	
Other or no response		0.5		0.5	
Age	3,569		1,922		.002
Adult		88.0		90.8	
Adolescent		12.0		9.2	
Sports & physical activity setting	3,492		1,897		.069
Club only		21.7		23.7	
Informal only		10.3		10.0	
Both		67.1		66.0	
Neither		0.9		0.4	
Sports & physical activity type	3,490		1,896		<.001
Team only		15.1		12.0	
Individual only		27.2		39.3	
Both		56.8		48.3	
Neither <sup>2</sup>		0.9		0.4	

<sup>1</sup>Chi-square test of independence

Table 17.3 shows summary statistics – means, standard deviations and medians of the five HR quality of life indicators – for metropolitan areas and rural and regional areas, together with the results of the t-test comparisons. The results indicate that, with no adjustment for the respondent characteristics, self-reported physical health was higher, by a statistically significant amount, in metropolitan areas.

The results of the ANOVA analyses for each of the five HR quality of life indicators are discussed in turn. For each indicator, there are four ANOVAs. Regarding general health, each of the four respondent characteristics – gender, age, setting and mode – had statistically significant main effects (gender  $p < .001$  in each case). Females reported better general health than males, and adolescents reported better general health than adults. For sports/physical activity, players of both organised and informal sports/physical activity had the best general health, non-players had the worst, and players in either one of organised or informal settings reported intermediate levels. Players of individual sports/physical activity had the best general health, non-players had the worst, and players of team sports/physical activity reported intermediate levels. However, there were no statistically significant effects of area in any of the four models (consistent with the null results of the t-test) and

**Table 17.3** Health-related quality of life indicators: summary statistics by geographical area.

Quality of life indicators	Geographical area								p-value <sup>1</sup>
	Metro				Regional and rural				
	N	Mean	Std dev.	Median	N	Mean	Std dev.	Median	
General health	2,918	3.48	0.96	4	1,595	3.44	0.92	4	.180
Physical health	2,905	3.35	0.98	3	1,588	3.28	0.94	3	.010
Mental health	2,910	3.31	1.07	3	1,590	3.33	1.04	3	.595
Well-being	2,740	3.61	0.66	3.71	1,503	3.62	0.64	3.71	.410
Life satisfaction	2,789	7.06	1.78	7	1,540	7.13	1.80	7	.261

<sup>1</sup>Independent samples t-test

Note: For each quality of life indicator, the higher mean value is shaded grey. Significant p-values ( $< .05$ ) are also shaded grey.

no statistically significant interactions. In short, general health showed no relationship, simple or more complex, to area.

For physical health, once again each of the four respondent characteristics – gender, age, setting and mode – had statistically significant main effects ( $p < .001$  in each case). Females reported better physical health than males, and adolescents reported better physical health than adults. The patterns of physical health across the categories of sports/physical activity settings and modes were similar to those for general health. The effect of area remained statistically significant after adjustment for gender ( $p = .011$ ) and age ( $p = .025$ ), with better physical health reported in metropolitan areas than in rural and regional areas. However, the effect of area was not significant after adjustment for setting or mode, suggesting that the regional difference in physical health is to some degree attributable to a greater focus on the health-promoting role of sports in metropolitan areas than in rural and regional areas. There were no statistically significant interactions, indicating that any area differences were not moderated by the respondent characteristics.

With regard to mental health, well-being and life satisfaction, the effects of area and the four respondent characteristics were more complex, with few significant main effects, but a number of statistically significant interactions between area and one or other of the characteristics.

For mental health, the only statistically significant main effect was for setting ( $p < .001$ ), and there were statistically significant interactions between area and setting ( $p = .048$ ) and area and gender ( $p = .006$ ). Regarding gender, the highest levels of mental health were reported by metropolitan males and rural and regional females, and the lowest levels by metropolitan females, with rural and regional males reporting intermediate levels. Regarding setting, the  $p$ -values show that the evidence for an interaction was much weaker than that for the main effect. That was reflected in the patterns of mental health across the categories of sports/physical activity settings and modes, which were, with only minor differences in the detail between metropolitan and rural and regional areas, similar to those for general health and physical health.

For well-being, the only statistically significant main effects were those of gender ( $p = .025$ ) and setting ( $p < .001$ ), and there were also significant interactions in each case between area and setting ( $p = .005$ ) and area and gender ( $p < .001$ ). Regarding gender, as for mental health, the highest levels of well-being were reported by metropolitan males and rural and regional females, and the lowest levels by metropolitan females, with rural and regional males reporting intermediate levels. Regarding setting, the pattern of well-being across the categories of sports settings were, with only minor differences in the detail between metropolitan and rural and regional areas, similar to those for general health, physical health and mental health.

For life satisfaction, there was a statistically significant main effect for area ( $p=.034$ ) when adjusted for the effect of mode ( $p=.001$ ), with higher levels of life satisfaction being reported in rural and regional areas. There were also statistically significant interactions between area and age ( $p=.027$ ) and area and setting ( $p=.016$ ). Regarding age, reported levels of life satisfaction were highest among rural and regional adults and lowest among rural and regional adolescents, with metropolitan adolescents and metropolitan adults reporting similar levels, slightly below the level of rural and regional adults. Regarding settings, the three physically active groups in both metropolitan and rural and regional areas, together with the physical inactive metropolitan group, all reported similar levels of life satisfaction, whereas the physically inactive respondents from rural and regional areas reported much higher levels of life satisfaction. Considering the relatively small sample sizes in the physically inactive groups, and the marginally significant  $p$ -value, this may be a chance anomaly.

## Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the investigation of the self-report indicators of the HR quality of life of individuals in rural and regional areas and in metropolitan areas of Australia, and what might be the contribution of participation in sports and physical activity, age and gender. While differences were observed in general health with respect to all of age, gender, sports and physical activity settings and modes, no differences were observed in general health between metropolitan areas and rural and regional areas, in any of the analyses conducted.

The only consistent difference observed between metropolitan areas and rural and regional areas was in physical health, with those in metropolitan areas reporting better physical health than those in rural and regional areas. This is not surprising given that people living in rural and regional areas consistently report poorer health and higher rates of chronic disease than their metropolitan counterparts, which can be exacerbated by poorer access to health facilities and services (Fennell et al., 2018). The difference remained after adjustment for gender and age, but not after adjustment for sports/physical activity settings or modes, suggesting that the difference could be to some degree attributed to differences between the patterns of sports participation in the two areas.

For mental health, well-being and life satisfaction, there were some differences between metropolitan areas and rural and regional areas, but these were more complex and dependent on gender, age and sports and physical activity settings and modes. Highest levels of mental health and



well-being were found among metropolitan males and rural and regional females, and lowest among metropolitan females. This may be directly influenced by COVID-19 restrictions. At the time of the survey, both the levels of risk and the impacts of the restrictions imposed were greater in the more densely populated metropolitan areas. Women were reportedly more likely to be burdened by the combination of working and caring duties than men, and more likely to lose their jobs than men (Farre et al., 2020).

Highest levels of life satisfaction were reported by rural and regional adults and lowest levels by rural and regional adolescents, with metropolitan adolescents and metropolitan adults reporting similar intermediate levels. This suggests a more differentiated pattern of changing aspirations throughout the lifespan in rural and regional areas, with rural and regional adolescents hankering for the ‘bright lights, big city’, while their parents are more likely to perceive other lifestyle, social and economic advantages of non-metropolitan environments.

Regarding sports and physical activity, in general, being active was associated with higher levels of all five HR quality of life indicators than for those who were inactive, which is consistent with the Health through Sport conceptual model. More specifically, both settings and modes of sports and physical activity had differential impacts on general health and physical health, while settings also impacted on mental health and well-being, whereas modes also impacted on life satisfaction.

The study had limitations with regard to both external and internal validity. Regarding external validity and representativeness of the sample, the sampling design was observational, with respondents self-selecting to participate. Nevertheless, [Table 17.2](#) shows that there was good representation across the categories of region and gender. The sample was skewed towards adult respondents, but the adolescent sample size was substantial. The great majority (3,461 and 1,889 respectively) were active participants in sports, physical activity, or both. Over ninety different codes of sports and physical activity were reported, with eighteen codes contributing more than 1 per cent of all reported instances of participation. While the proportion of physically inactive people in the sample was small in absolute terms, the sample size of this group was nevertheless considerable. The different types and settings of activity were well represented.

Regarding internal validity, the study was cross-sectional and observational and hence demonstrated relationships rather than causal links between the dependent quality of life variables and the key explanatory factor – region; appropriate adjustments were made for the potential confounders age and gender, as well as the activity-related explanatory factors – settings and types of activity. Regarding the activity-related factors in particular, the cross-sectional nature of the study makes it impossible to rule out reverse

causality, whereby quality of life measures might be determinants of activity, as well as or instead of, being affected by activity.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that indicators of HR quality of life differ among those living in rural and regional areas compared to metropolitan areas, in conjunction with differences attributable to gender, age and settings and modes of sports/physical activity participation. We know that the social nature of participation in sports and physical activity can positively influence participation and quality of life. It is likely that the magnitude of contribution of community sports and physical activity organisations, as civil society citizens, differs between areas, such as rural compared to metropolitan communities. This may contribute to differences in quality of life; however, these differences are likely to be also influenced by age, gender and other demographics. Further, there are indications that COVID-19 has impacted the HR quality of life of individuals differently according to their circumstances and, in particular, that females more than males (in metropolitan areas) were negatively affected by the pressures of combining home and home-schooling duties with a higher likelihood of job loss. In conclusion, the key elements of the Health through Sport conceptual model are supported by this research, in that participation in sports can lead to improved health benefits.

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# Part IV

Measuring rural quality of life



# Framing essay IV

*Henrik Lauridsen Lolle*

## Introduction

For many years we have witnessed a net migration from rural areas to urban areas all over the world. The main underlying forces are structural changes from rural to urban industries and jobs. However, the city is also considered to be attractive in many ways that could improve human well-being. The city has offered more attractive job opportunities; more education possibilities for young people; a much wider spectrum of cultural activities, like museums, theatres and sporting events; many kinds of cafes and restaurants; specialty stores; and so on. Furthermore, objective measures show greater average life quality in the city. One can summarise this perspective on urban growth with the title of Edward Glaeser's seminal book *The Triumph of the City* (Glaeser, 2011). However, in recent years, research from all over the global North has shown either no difference in subjective well-being between rural and urban areas, or even higher average levels of subjective well-being in rural areas (Burger et al., 2020; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2017; Sørensen, 2013; Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011). In the literature, this phenomenon is termed *the urban happiness paradox*.

However, the results are, to a large degree, heterogeneous across countries, and the difference between urban and rural subjective well-being can change at different speeds and different directions in different developed countries. New generations and new urban–rural migrations patterns, for instance, can rather quickly change the balance in the overall results. Furthermore, the results are not ‘global’ in the sense that they apply to all kinds of people. These and other insights about the complex patterns spur the scientific community to do more case-oriented research to pinpoint the detailed differences in single countries and try to explain the pattern of subjective well-being in different geographical areas. In case studies it is easier to do away with the rural–urban binary, as written about in the introductory [Chapter 1](#). When focusing on selected case countries, in general it is also much easier to find or select data targeted at the specific research questions.



### Difference in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas

Are people happier and more satisfied with their lives in rural areas, and if so, does this derive from the composition of the population, or is there a genuine causal association so that certain area-specific qualities on average make people happier? Which sociodemographic or other groups are thriving better in rural areas, and which place-based qualities in the rural areas have an impact on subjective well-being for people in general or for specific groups of people? These questions are of great importance for theory and empirical research in the field to answer.

Two very different and opposing theoretical strands stand out in recent scientific debate about rural areas vs the city in respect of people's well-being, and two of the most cited authors are placed in each of these strands. On one side stands economist Edward Glaeser. In his seminal book *Triumph of the City* (Glaeser, 2011) he glorifies the city. The city has been one of the prime motors of the development from poor agrarian societies to educated, rich, democratic societies. In the city, different kinds of people meet, new ideas are put into practice, people get education, entrepreneurship and business flourish etc. Besides, the city beats the countryside in being more climate friendly. However, what about the inequality, poverty and slums in many big cities? Of course, Glaeser recognises that slums can be problematic, and that some cities have got problems which authorities should take care of, but overall, the city is a good thing, not just as a temporary step in the development of human life on earth, but also at present and in the future. Besides, most people in city slums are better off here than in the poorer countryside. In his opinion, the city slum is not inhabited with unhappy people because slums are a bad thing that make people unhappy. Unhappy people migrate to the city slums because of unhappiness, and because they seek, and often find, a better life in the city.

On the other side of this debate stands political scientist Adam Okulicz-Kozyran, who has written extensively on this subject. While some people might be better off in the city, Okulicz-Kozyran thinks that in general the city is a bad place for people to live: 'One explanation that people do not kill each other consistently when crowded in cities is that our instincts are subdued due to culture, norms and so on as Freud has observed long time ago, and of course, there is police and other restraining factors' (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015, p. 105). The countryside stands for *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to the *Gesellschaft*, and *natural will* opposed to *economic rationality*. In Okulicz-Kozaryn's opinion, Edward Glaeser falls into a classic ecological fallacy when he states that in countries with the highest degree of urban development, people are on average happier than in other countries

(Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2017). However, this is an ecological fallacy only if Glaeser *from* this deduces that, in modern welfare states, people in cities are on average happier than people in the countryside, and this is indeed not his purpose. His main purpose is to convince the reader that cities have positive effects on the country's population as a whole, not just the city's inhabitants. In this respect, the existence of big cities is a macro effect, at least in highly developed countries.

While some of the writings of Okulicz-Kozyran are rather high-flown (e.g. Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015), his analyses show sober, scientific quality. Together with co-author Brian J. L. Berry (Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2009), he analysed World Values Survey data merged with European Value Study data from around the turn of the century, including sixty countries around the world. There were two main results. First, after controlling for relevant individual-level characteristics like age, education and income, there was on average no difference in happiness between urban and rural areas in low-income countries. Second, when analysing high-income countries, the average level of happiness was statistically significantly greater in rural areas than in large cities. More specifically, this second conclusion applies mainly to countries with an Anglo-Saxon heritage and not to countries with a Latin heritage. In a follow-up article, Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011) analyse the urban–rural happiness difference in the US only, with data from the General Social Survey. In this article, the authors find a clear pattern showing an urban–rural happiness gradient with the urban–rural measured on a four-point ordinal scale, from rural areas and small towns to large central cities. Over the years from 1972 to 2008, average happiness nearly constantly follows the same trend from lowest in large central cities to highest in rural areas and small towns. This clear pattern is intact after controlling for background variables like age, income and marital status. However, after inclusion of variables for race and ancestral roots (Northwest Europe, Mediterranean, Africa and reference category 'other'), the authors find a very weak and marginally statistically significant effect only for the most rural category vs big cities. That is, race and ancestral roots explain nearly all differences in happiness between urban and rural residence. Only in big cities with more than 250,000 inhabitants do the authors find average happiness a tiny bit lower than elsewhere. Despite these results, the authors end the article by stating that the continued migration from big cities to countryside among other things reflects a 'fundamental feature of American life, the continuing pursuit of the happiness associated with lower density living and the persistence of cultural difference associated with it' (Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011, p. 881). In addition, the authors could have discussed the possible interesting connection between two different conclusions in their two articles. In the article published in 2009, they find that the urban–rural

happiness gradient only applies to countries with an Anglo-Saxon heritage and not to countries with a Latin heritage. In the 2011 article, they find that a dummy variable for northwestern ancestral roots explains a lot of the urban–rural happiness gradient.

Theoretically, Okulicz-Kozaryn, with changing co-authors, draws heavily on Louis Wirth's work on the effects of living in an urban environment (Wirth, 1938), and Wirth, again, draws mostly on the works of two grand old men from the first generation of sociologists, Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. The main hypothesis is that the city, through population size, density and heterogeneity, develops 'anomie, alienation, and social disorganization' (Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011, p. 872). On one hand, the individual in the city gets more freedom through emancipation from tradition and customs, but also 'loses, on the other hand, the spontaneous self-expression, the morale, and the sense of participation that comes with living in an integrated society' (Wirth, 1938, p. 13). As Wirth further writes about the city dweller, 'only rarely is he truly a neighbor' (Wirth, 1938, p. 17). These things cause, Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011, p. 873) write, the city to destroy social capital and generalised social trust (drawing here too on Robert Putnam) with the cost, among other things, of lesser life satisfaction. Furthermore, in the city the pecuniary nexus displaces personal relations as the basis of association (Wirth, 1938, p. 17). Life becomes a rat race, always striving for more. In a later article, Okulicz-Kozaryn and co-author Joan Maya Mazelis tried to test these hypotheses in their statistical analyses by controlling the effect from the urban–rural continuum with city problems like crime and poverty. They found a robust effect after controlling and conclude, with some caution, that the city *per se* is lowering subjective well-being, and that the lower subjective well-being in cities is not caused solely by problems that often accompany city life (Okulicz-Kazaryn & Mazelis, 2018). Unfortunately, for some reason the authors do not control for northwestern ancestral roots, a factor that in a previous article by Okulicz-Kozaryn, mentioned above, was one of the most important factors in explaining the urban–rural happiness gradient in the US.

With some hesitation, Okulicz-Kozaryn, in one of his latest publications (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2019) admits that there is some evidence from the US that the gap between urban and rural dwellers in subjective well-being over the last decade has diminished, and that the youngest generation even seems to be happier with living in the city than in the countryside. Nothing points to an age effect, i.e. a passing effect, and he cannot find an explanation for this among his usual arsenal of explanatory factors. Furthermore, he agrees with Glaeser that cities are more climate friendly than sprawling people out in the countryside. His conclusion is, however, a bit surprisingly, that we ought to reduce the human population on

earth so that the climate can cope with human sprawl (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015). Likewise, Glaeser recognises that not all cities should be triumphed, for instance the outdated industrial Detroit, and he recognises urban poverty: ‘The occasional success story doesn’t mean that urban poverty isn’t awful. It is’ (Glaeser, 2011, p. 75). On the other hand, Glaeser as a real economist thinks that people sometimes willingly, and for good reasons, choose to be less happy than what is possible: ‘humans are quite understandably willing to sacrifice happiness or life satisfaction if the price is right’ (Glaeser et al., 2016, p. 169), and the price can be, for instance, high income or low housing prices. This statement runs counter to much of the theory on subjective well-being. As written about in [Chapter 1](#) in this book, much theory argues that the concept of subjective well-being has advantages over the concept of preferences to learn something about utility. Clearly, agents could be willing to offer some pleasantness and perhaps feelings of happiness for some other goals, but the same would hardly account for life satisfaction. However, this is also a question of definition of the concept of *life satisfaction*.

The heated scientific debate about big city life vs rural life does sometimes seem pervaded by misunderstandings and ideological oppositions, with one camp discussing *homo economicus* and the other camp discussing the natural human being and a lost paradise. However, as one of the forerunners in happiness research, Ruut Veenhoven (1984) wrote, ‘[t]here is some truth in the socio-biological assertion that evolution did not design us for city life. Yet it did not predispose us to rural life either. Current sedentary life in farms and villages is equally remote from the original hunter/gatherer life as urban life in streets and stockbuildings.’

An example of possible misunderstandings is Okulicz-Kozaryn’s claim that in developing countries there is, on average, no difference in happiness between urban and rural areas. He shows, correctly, that after statistical control for background variables like education and income, happiness is the same. He also writes that Veenhoven, back in 1994, was wrong in writing that average happiness was greater in urban areas in developing countries. The problem here is that Okulicz-Kozaryn perhaps overdoes the statistical controls. The question is whether one should consider variables measuring, for instance, education and income as control variables or mediating variables. They can be both, but in developing countries, these variables are probably mostly mediating variables. The city causes education and income to rise. This is one of Edward Glaeser’s main points in his book *Triumph of the City* and is elegantly analysed empirically in an article written by Easterlin et al. (2011). Part of the subjective well-being gap in developing countries could be because of selectivity of rural–urban migration, where the higher educated from the rural areas migrate to the city, but

as the authors write, ‘while selectivity of rural–urban migration could conceivably contribute to the observed urban–rural differences in life satisfaction, it is highly unlikely that it could be quantitatively important’ (Easterlin et al., 2011, p. 2194). Furthermore, the authors write that the levelling of the happiness gap between urban and rural areas in developed countries ‘is due largely to a convergence in urban and rural occupational structures, income levels, and education’ (Easterlin et al., 2011, p. 2195). Two historical trends are mostly responsible for this convergence. First, there is a weakening of close bonds between place of work and place of residence caused by the development of general-purpose technology. Second, there has been an increase in the elderly opting for rural residence, caused by changing demographics and rising income.

In the 2020 *World Happiness Report*, Burger et al. (2020) use cross-sectional data from the Gallup World Poll across 150 countries (2014–2018) to analyse differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas. Again, we see the same picture, with greater well-being in cities in the developing countries and a closed well-being gap in the developed countries or even a little higher level of well-being in rural areas. In their analyses, the authors use three different measures of subjective well-being, life evaluation (the Cantril ladder) and both positive (enjoyment and laughter) and negative (worry, sadness and anger) affect. The general pattern, described above, is most pronounced when using life evaluation as the dependent variable. When using measures for positive and negative affect, the number of countries with a non-statistically significant difference between rural and urban areas is much greater. After having investigated the general pattern on the full data set, the authors selected two extreme cases in respect of the size and direction of the happiness gap between rural and urban areas, sub-Saharan Africa and the Western world. In these two cases the authors investigated what factors lie behind the urban–rural gap. In sub-Saharan Africa, the higher subjective well-being in urban areas is mostly due to economic situation, economic optimism and education. Whether one should consider these factors as causes or mediating factors is debatable, as mentioned above. In countries belonging to the Western world, these same factors still push subjective well-being up in urban areas in comparison with rural areas. However, other factors show significant effects that point in the direction of greater rural area subjective well-being, namely a higher degree of community attachment and housing affordability and a lower percentage of single households (Burger et al., 2020). Measures for social capital and feeling of safety also point in the direction of rural area advantage, but are not statistically significant. Some of these factors can be deduced from the theory of Wirth, Simmel, Tönnies and Putnam, referred to above and used as the theoretical basis by Okulicz-Kozaryn in his analyses.

On data from the European Values Study from 2008, Jens Fyhn Lykke Sørensen (2014) finds greater average happiness for rural dwellers than for urban dwellers inside the EU region. However, as also applied for the US, the difference is small, although statistically significant after relevant controls. Furthermore, and what applies for the US case too, the findings are not homogeneous across countries/states. Sørensen seeks to explain the higher average subjective well-being in rural areas by including some explanatory factors in his regression analyses. For most of his explanatory hypotheses, these are deducible from the classical theories discussed above: a higher level of feeling of insecurity in the city, higher sense of community feeling in rural areas and a greater amount of social capital and social trust in rural areas. He finds variables in the data that are more or less well suited for measuring these concepts. Among these three explanations of the higher level of subjective well-being in rural areas, only the amount of social capital seems to matter. The measure for social capital, *participation in voluntary work*, explains part of the difference between rural and urban areas, but the vast part of the difference is intact and still highly statistically significant.

Besides hypotheses deduced from the more classical sociological theories, Sørensen also draws on social *reference group theory* to explain the lower subjective well-being in city areas. In subjective well-being research, reference group theory states that people use comparison with a reference group when evaluating their subjective well-being, for instance people living in their neighbourhood. This theory is often used as an explanation of the Easterlin paradox, i.e. that wealthy people in general are happier than are poor people, but as societies get more and more wealthy, we do not see any parallel increase in happiness (Easterlin, 1995). Sørensen argues that wealth inequality is more pronounced in cities than in rural areas, and if people evaluate their well-being according to the reference group theory, you might expect lower average well-being in the cities. The hypothesis is interesting, but Sørensen's operationalisation and analysis strategy is not convincing, and he does not find any statistical explanation either.

Another theory often used to explain the Easterlin paradox is *aspiration theory* (Bjørnskov et al., 2007). In relation to research in subjective well-being, this theory argues that humans are always striving after more and never really satisfied. We aspire to some goal, but as we reach this goal, we adapt to the new situation and get new aspirations. Because of this, we are caught in a never-ending rat race and with no gain in subjective well-being no matter what we obtain. With reference to Okulicz-Kozyrin and Wirth, we can expect this constant striving for more to be more prevalent in the city, where the pecuniary nexus is hypothesised to displace personal relations as the basis of association.

In the first introductory section of this framing essay, we wrote that cities clearly have a lot to offer in relation to the countryside, when it comes to amenities like possibilities for education, broad spectrum of job opportunities, restaurants, museums, sporting and cultural events etc. However, there is another side to this. Often, the countryside has something else to offer that many people enjoy too. Nature seems very often much more present in the countryside. Of course, there is a lot of romanticising about the rural idyll (Shucksmith, 2018). The reality of modern agriculture is far removed from the romantic image, but at least some rural areas possess some qualities that no city can offer. For instance, van den Berg et al. (2010, p. 1208) found that 'green space in a 3-km radius around the home significantly decreased the relationships of stressful life events with number of health complaints and perceived general health'. Furthermore, the results from their analyses suggested that the buffering effect mostly applied to 'more large-scale nature areas, such as forests, dune areas or agricultural fields' (van den Berg et al., 2010, p. 1208). Brereton et al. (2008) used Irish survey data merged with GIS data to investigate the effect on life satisfaction from a series of spatial variables measuring the distance from respondents to different kinds of amenities. They found, among other things, a strong and highly statistically significant positive effect from proximity to coast. In their analyses, the authors control for living in Dublin, the only big city in Ireland. This dummy variable has a negative effect on life satisfaction. However, the authors do not investigate any possible interaction between the Dublin dummy and proximity to coast, and we therefore do not know if the positive effect from proximity to coast is restricted to the countryside, or if it applies to people living in the wider area of a big city too. This question relates to a broader question about nature and green spaces in cities. Can urban dwellers gain the same positive effects from natural surroundings as rural dwellers if the city planning is right? Obviously, even a city with lots of good green spaces cannot match a good countryside on all criteria. But then again, not all people are alike. In a review article, Wolch et al. (2014) show that parks and urban green space in many instances have a positive effect on physical activity, health and psychological well-being. So perhaps the fulfilment of needs just depends on who you are. As human beings, we might need some kind of green surroundings, but while some just need city parks, others perhaps need a forest, and perhaps even others might just need a cat and some potted plants in their small city apartment. Likewise, some people might thrive in big cities with high density, people everywhere, restaurants, sporting events etc., while other people thrive better in low-density open landscapes.

This last point brings us to the question of personality and values. Research indicates that people with somewhat alike personality structure, via several different social mechanisms, cluster together in geographical areas (Rentfrow

et al., 2008). Verma and Thakar (2019) find that personality, conceptualised with *the big five* (or the *Five Factor Model*), correlates with personal values, for instance that *extraversion* correlates with *hedonism*. This, in a way, relates personality structure with the concept of subjective well-being, where hedonism often is opposed to eudomania, see Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1. The connection between values and subjective well-being is shown too by Morrison and Weckroth (2018) on European Social Survey data from Finland. The authors show how people in metropolitan areas (Helsinki) on average possess more hedonic values than do people living in the countryside, and that on average people with hedonic values have lower subjective well-being.

### Research design and the question of causal mechanisms

Causality is ever-present in the discussion about hypotheses and results, although not always explicit. All of the research discussed above uses statistical controls in some way, and the prime reason to use such controls is trying to come a bit closer to conclusions about causality pattern and effect, i.e. the effect of living in a rural area in comparison with an urban area. As mentioned above, it is not always easy to decide if one should consider variables like, for instance, education and income as controls for spuriousness or as mediators of an effect. If one is interested in long-term effects, and especially in developing countries, variables like level of education and income are probably more mediating factors than controls for spuriousness. The city is one of the driving factors in the development of education, rising income and living standards etc. In this way, you can say that control for education and income is overdoing the controls. On the other hand, in developed countries, the city effects have been more or less spread out to the whole country. As Burger et al. (2020, p. 82) write, the rural dwellers ‘are able to “borrow” the positive effects of cities’, and at the same time they are not ‘subject to the negative externalities of urbanization’ (2020, p. 82). So, in that case, it is perhaps more correct to consider these variables as controls for spuriousness. However, even when Glaeser and co-authors analyse data from American cities, they do not control for income or employment, ‘as these represent outcomes that may be caused by an area’s economic success’ (Glaeser et al., 2016, p. 141). At least one should not control for this kind of variable thoughtlessly. The conclusions about effects cannot be deduced from statistical analyses on cross-sectional data. However, this is not a recommendation to abstain from including variables other than the dependent and the main independent variable, and to adjust the ‘effect’ from an urban–rural variable on subjective well-being; one should just be cautious with the conclusions.



Many individual-level variables have been found to correlate with subjective well-being, some of which have been mentioned in the discussions above. Furthermore, many of these variables are correlated with, or interact with, degree of urbanisation too. Some of the most important of these variables are age, marital status, having a vocational education, income, health and social trust. Taking such variables into consideration is crucial when investigating the correlation between urban/rural and subjective well-being.

Nearly all previous research in subjective well-being differences between rural and urban areas have used only cross-sectional data or repeated cross-sectional data. Classical experimental design is out of the question, but a few studies have taken the advantage of also using panel data to be able to learn something more about the causal mechanisms involved. With individual-level panel data, the researcher follows individuals across time with two or more measuring occasions. With this sort of data, the researcher can analyse what happens to people's subjective well-being when they migrate, when either moving from the city to the countryside or vice versa, and the researcher can compare this development with other non-migrating individuals. In this way, with the control for base-level subjective well-being, the researcher is able to come somewhat closer to the so-called counterfactual situation; for instance, what would have happened to Mrs Johnson's subjective well-being if she had not migrated from the city to the countryside? Naturally, one cannot from this kind of analysis say that Mrs Robinson, who is staying in the city, and is the same age as Mrs Johnson, is married just like Johnson, etc., would experience the same change in subjective well-being if she too had moved to the countryside. No matter the character of the research design, one should be careful not to draw too ambitious conclusions. People are different from each other and trying to decide which is better for humans to live in, the city or the countryside, is a bit like comparing which taste better, apples or bananas.

In theory, it is of course possible to imagine some globally existing causal mechanisms in favour of either cities or rural areas. This is close to Okulicz-Kozaryn's view, discussed in the first part of this section. However, even Okulicz-Kozaryn recognised that some people seem to thrive better in city environments. Therefore, if we do not seek rescue in concepts like *false consciousness*, the causal mechanisms in place will depend on the specific geographical case and which agents we are investigating. On the other hand, it is possible that we can learn something about average effects for some specific groups of people living in, for instance, the Western world shortly after the turn of the century. In fact, this is what we, as social scientists, usually acknowledge, but in this case, it is safe to say that the problem is especially wicked.

### Presentation of the chapters

All chapters in this section take on a quantitative approach, and all chapters, except Veenhoven's, in one way or another investigate differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas. Lolle investigates the case of Denmark, a geographically small, universal welfare state. He uses person-level, register panel data merged with survey data from thirty-eight municipalities to analyse differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas by way of multilevel regression analyses. The survey data include several different domain satisfaction measures as well as different subjective well-being dimensions.

In the following chapter, Viganò et al. explore whether the difference in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas in Italy has changed between 2008 and 2018, and if so, in what way and how much? In 2008 Italy experienced the same development as is seen in general in the Western world, namely with rural areas having a higher average level of subjective well-being. The question now is whether this pattern is intact ten years later. In their analyses, Viganò et al. investigate more specifically whether effect factors on subjective well-being are more or less the same in urban and rural areas, and if this has changed during the investigated period. Pasqualini too, in her chapter with France as a case, investigates changes in subjective well-being in urban and rural areas. However, she looks specifically at changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her reference measure is just before the start of the pandemic, and she has data from eight follow-up rounds through the pandemic.

Colley et al. perform primary and secondary analyses to critically examine the value of outdoor recreation for the well-being of rural residents. The primary focus for the authors is exploring the inequalities in the use of outdoor recreation in rural areas. However, they also discuss future outdoor recreation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, and ask if the pandemic might act as a moment of change and reshaping habits. Lund uses the same survey and register data as does Lolle. Also in this chapter, the analyses explore differences in subjective well-being between Danish localities. However, a main purpose for Lund is to discuss definitions and mapping of neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood studies have been done since early Chicago School sociology, but only a few have been interested in trying to map them validly in quantitative studies. Lund has developed a new method for mapping such neighbourhoods more flexibly than with the borders of official administrative units or by just using squares on a map. He shows his method in use on research questions about subjective well-being and neighbourhoods, and with a focus also on urban vs rural.

Veenhoven et al. stretch the focus of the book away from quality of life in rural areas to the incorporation of rural elements in urban environments.

The authors introduce the reader to *biophilia* theory and to the furthering of *urban* green, and the main research question is whether urban green has a positive effect on happiness. The authors also present a new method for doing synthesis analysis, collecting results from existing research on the correlation between happiness and urban green from the World Database of Happiness. They use results from seventeen empirical studies between 2004 and 2018 from eleven countries around the world.

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## Differences in subjective well-being between rural and urban areas in Denmark

*Henrik Lauridsen Lolle*

### Introduction

In this chapter, we investigate the differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas in Denmark. We expect Denmark to be a good example of the reversing of the urban–rural gap in subjective well-being. As written in the framing essay to this section, in developing countries in general the level of subjective well-being is higher in cities than in rural areas, while in developed countries this gap is lessened or even reversed. We will undertake analysis on unique data, regarding the richness and size as well as the structure. The data includes a cross-sectional survey data set from 2015, merged with individual-level register data with yearly measures between 1982 and 2017.

The design of the survey questionnaire makes it possible for us to analyse the urban–rural difference in subjective well-being in several different ways. For instance, we can measure these differences on the dimension of *life satisfaction* as well as the dimension of *affects*, both positive and negative. Furthermore, we have measures of life satisfaction on several domains, like family, job and spare time. Lastly, we also have measures of *eudaimonic* aspects, like feeling of autonomy. It is rare to have access to all these different subjective well-being measures together with nearly ideal possibilities to investigate differences in these between urban and rural local areas.

The panel design of the register data opens possibilities to test a series of hypotheses concerning migration between urban and rural areas and subjective well-being. Unfortunately, we cannot follow individuals across time from the survey data, but the combination of cross-section survey data and panel register data enables analyses that are somewhat comparable to ‘real’ panel analyses. For instance, we can compare subjective well-being of people who have moved from the city to the countryside with the subjective well-being of alike people who we *know*, from the register data, will move from the city to the countryside one or two years later. This resembles to some degree panel analysis.

The independent variables of primary interest will be measures of a differentiation between rural and urban areas, but not as a simple dichotomy. Primarily, we will here use (1) a five-point municipality typology; (2) an individual-level measure from Statistics Denmark on degree of urbanisation; and (3) these two measures in combination.

### Discussion of Denmark as a case

Denmark was, together with the other Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, placed as one of the core *universal* (or *social democratic*) welfare states in Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology. Although there has been much debate of welfare state retrenchment, Denmark can still be characterised as a universal welfare state with a high degree of economic equality (Béland et al., 2014; van Kersbergen et al., 2014). Especially since the municipality reform in 1970, when around 1,200 municipalities were amalgamated to 275 and 'an advanced inter-municipal equalization system was established' (Blom-Hansen, 2012), this equality has to a high degree applied to differences between local areas too, including a diminishing difference in economic capabilities between urban and rural municipalities. For instance, Kurt Houllberg (2000) showed how the municipalities became ever more alike in respect of different key public service measures, indicating more homogeneity in public service quality. In 2007, the Danish municipal structure was once again reformed. Municipalities were amalgamated to now ninety-eight municipalities with a minimum of 20,000 inhabitants (besides a few exceptions, for instance some smaller islands). After this reform in the municipal structure there followed, among other things, reforms in the inter-municipal equalisation schemes that led to still more equalisation between rich and poor municipalities (Blom-Hansen, 2012; Etzerodt & Pedersen, 2018). Although relatively poor municipalities still complain about an unfair system, the municipalities in Denmark have a high degree of equality regarding public service. This said, there are more than marginal differences in public service expenditures between municipalities in Denmark. For instance (Jensen & Lolle, 2013) found rather large differences between municipalities in spending on elder care in 2005, especially that those municipalities with a large percentage of elderly had lower spending per elder citizen, and these municipalities are mostly rural municipalities. Furthermore, in Denmark we still see rural-urban migration, abandoned houses in rural areas, closure of shops in villages and closure of, for instance, public educational institutions and hospitals in rural areas because of centralisation.

Despite these developments, we can expect Denmark to be a good example of the reversal of the urban-rural gap in subjective well-being in

developed countries. Easterlin et al. (2011) wrote that the urban–rural difference in life satisfaction is sizeable in less developed countries with urban dwellers being the most satisfied, while it is negligible or even reversed in the developed countries due mostly to a levelling of urban and rural occupational structures, income levels and education. The authors further write that primarily two factors can possibly explain this: first, the weakening of the close bond between place of work and place of residence following from development in economy and information technology, and second, a growing proportion of elderly, free to decide where to live in their retirement. You could say, along with Meijers and Burger (2017) and Burger et al. (2020), that the countryside in this way also *borrow*s the positive effects from big cities. In geographically small Denmark, there is nowhere a very far from periphery to centre. Being also an economically highly developed universal welfare state, including a high degree of equality between citizens and between municipalities, we expect that the above-mentioned reversing trend will be pronounced in Denmark.

Overall, previous research supports this expectation. In relation to the two municipality structure reforms in 1970 and 2007, we have seen a number of research publications concerning mostly the effects from size of municipality on aspects of democracy and satisfaction with public service. Because of the high correlation between number of inhabitants and urbanisation, and because satisfaction with democracy and public service potentially relates to subjective well-being, these research results are relevant also in relation to the question on the urban–rural dimension and well-being. Democracy and autonomy are central elements of well-being, and satisfaction with public service can be considered as a domain satisfaction of the overall concept of subjective well-being. Some of this research mostly concerns the effect from jurisdictional geographical area, e.g. Lassen and Serritzlew (2010), while other studies, e.g. Kjær and Mouritzen (2003), Lolle (2000) and Nielsen and Vestergaard (2014), directly or indirectly also concern the division between urban and rural areas. The overall impression from these and other investigations is that there seems to be a weak negative effect from degree of urbanisation on evaluation of democracy and public service quality.

From the international literature, written about in the framing essay of this section, empirical analyses generally show a higher average level of social capital and participation in voluntary work in rural areas, things that positively affect subjective well-being. Research on Danish data has also found such results. For instance, Sørensen and Levinsen (2010) and Henriksen and Levinsen (2019) found large negative effects from big city areas on participation in voluntary work, and Svendsen and Svendsen (2014) found that, although generalised social trust is higher in cities, particularised social trust, understood as trust in neighbours and people in the neighbourhood,

is higher in rural areas. The authors argue that this kind of particularised social trust is more valuable with respect to reciprocal help and feeling of safety. These findings are in line with the theoretical propositions in urban sociological theory developed by Louis Wirth (1938), and used extensively by Adam Okulicz-Kozyran (for instance Okulicz-Kozaryn & Mazelis, 2018), hypothesising that in cities we will see a pecuniary nexus displacing personal relations, a growing tendency of anomie, restlessness, blasé attitude, etc.

All these things considered, it seems a bit strange that for many years we have seen a negative media discourse about rural areas in Denmark, with the use of terms like ‘the rotten banana’, indicating the overall geographical shape of the most concentrated rural areas. Several schools, hospitals and other public institutions have closed in recent years, especially in rural areas; people lose their jobs, people migrate to the city, villages have problems with abandoned houses, etc. Sørensen and Svendsen (2014) also show that the countryside in Denmark has a bad reputation in the population. This spurs Jens Fyhn Lykke Sørensen (2018) to ask in a report title, ‘Are things really so bad in the countryside?’ (author’s translation). He analyses survey data from the Danish sample of the European Social Survey 2002–2014, and his conclusion is that living in the countryside on average seems fine, no matter the bad reputation and media discourse. Before statistical controls for compositional effects, the average level of subjective well-being in the countryside lies a bit above subjective well-being in the city, and on the same level after controls. On newer data, the Danish sample of the European Value Study 2017, Lolle and Andersen (2019) find no subjective well-being divide between city and countryside either before or after statistical controls.

### **Empirical expectations as well as some more explorative hypotheses**

Above, we have discussed some important issues in relation to the Danish case when investigating the divide in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas. As a geographically small, universal welfare state, Denmark most likely has only minor differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas. If we find any significant overall difference, we expect a higher level of subjective well-being in rural areas, and that denser social networks and a higher participation in voluntary work might explain at least some of this difference. Of course, the list of factors that potentially can cause differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas is very long, many of which are also discussed at some length in the framing essay. For instance, we know that in rural areas there are bigger proportions



of married people and elderly people, and both groups have higher average levels of subjective well-being. On the other hand, people in rural areas on average have lower incomes, which in general tends to lower subjective well-being. In the analyses, we therefore take account of the compositional effects from age, marital status and other background variables.

Besides these factors and the above discussion on local democracy, local service and civil associational life, big cities have more cultural offers, restaurants, museums, sporting events and so on. On the other hand, the city has its own problems, with noise, pollution and crime and with the social order, as argued by sociologists like Simmel, Durkheim, Wirth and much later Okulicz-Kozaryn. Likewise, urban areas in general have a higher degree of income inequality, and there is nowhere like the city to expose economic wealth. At the same time, the countryside can offer natural environmental qualities that cities cannot compete with, like open green space and forests.

In the regression analyses below, we are able to include many of the above-mentioned factors as potentially explaining variables. This counts, for instance, for variables measuring aspects of associational life, trust in local politicians and feeling of attachment to place of living. However, there are countless potentially explaining factors. Because of the hierarchical structure of the data, with samples of respondents from a series of municipalities, we have the possibility to pinpoint possible outlying municipalities and to do more case-oriented and detailed analyses on these. However, as evident from the analyses below, no municipalities stand out with respect to subjective well-being.

Somewhat exploratively, we investigate whether differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas are homogeneous across different dimensions of subjective well-being: cognitive, affective and eudaimonic. Parallel to this, we also analyse differences between domain-specific subjective satisfaction measures, and we investigate whether the effects from domain-specific measures on overall life satisfaction are homogeneous between urban and rural areas.

Whether or not we find any significant difference in the *average level* of subjective well-being between urban and rural areas, we might expect marked differences among specific groups of people. From a policy perspective, this could be an interesting question, regardless of whether we see a difference on average or not. The pinpointing of who thrives and who do not thrive in cities and countryside, respectively, might provide the policy-making process with valuable information. For this reason, we analyse some specific groups of people separately.

Okulicz-Kozaryn and Velente (2019) found that the youngest, millennial, generation in the US thrives significantly better in big cities, while Burger et al. (2020) found that, in developed countries in general, this only applies

to highly educated young people. Furthermore, these authors found that in recent years we have witnessed a growing number of low-educated people with low job security in the city that have worryingly low levels of subjective well-being. This hypothesis might be stretched to also include higher-educated young people facing job insecurity, referring to city well-being problems among members of the *precariat* (Standing, 2011). Anyway, we will, more or less exploratively, analyse young people aged 18–25 and 26–35 respectively. Like other developed countries, Denmark has had a net migration from rural to urban areas. However, in recent years more young women than men have migrated to cities for education, leaving the remaining young men potentially with problems of finding a partner. For this reason, we analyse an interaction effect between sex and urban–rural typology among young people.

Despite the net migration from rural to urban areas, a sizeable number of people still migrate the other way, from urban to rural areas. Not least, we see this type of migration among elderly people who want to spend their retirement in the countryside. We have register data on all respondents included in the survey, and these register data occur both before and after the survey interviews. Because of this structure of the data, we can construct several comparison groups that can help us in the conclusion about the effect of migration on well-being. Regarding the elderly who in their retirement have moved from the city to the countryside, we can compare these with similar people who will do the same one to three years after the time of the survey interviews. Likewise, we can compare these elderly urban–rural migrants with similar people that stay in the city.

Of course, groups other than elderly people migrate from urban to rural areas, both families with small children and middle-aged people. However, a large number of people migrating to the countryside move away again after a few years, and a sizeable number of the rural immigrants feel that they do not belong to the place (Nørgaard et al., 2010). Therefore, a working hypothesis is that newcomers in rural areas feel less recognition, participate less in local associations and do less voluntary work than do long-term residents, and that this affects their satisfaction with their everyday life. We therefore will also analyse newcomers in rural areas separately. As in the analysis on elderly urban–rural migrants, we match the migrants with comparable groups to measure the effect of migration. More exploratively, we analyse the well-being for both urban–rural and rural–urban migrants.

A few last issues that can complicate the analysis of potential differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas should be mentioned. First, people from different cultures potentially can give on average different answers to the same question about subjective well-being no matter that they have the same level of subjective well-being. This applies to cultures like nation cultures and language cultures as well as subcultures (Lolle &

Andersen, 2019). Second, people from different cultures can have different levels of expectations, which might result in well-being differences too (Mouritzen, 1985–1986; Hjortskov, 2018; Schwandt, 2015).

### Data and the prime dependent and independent variables

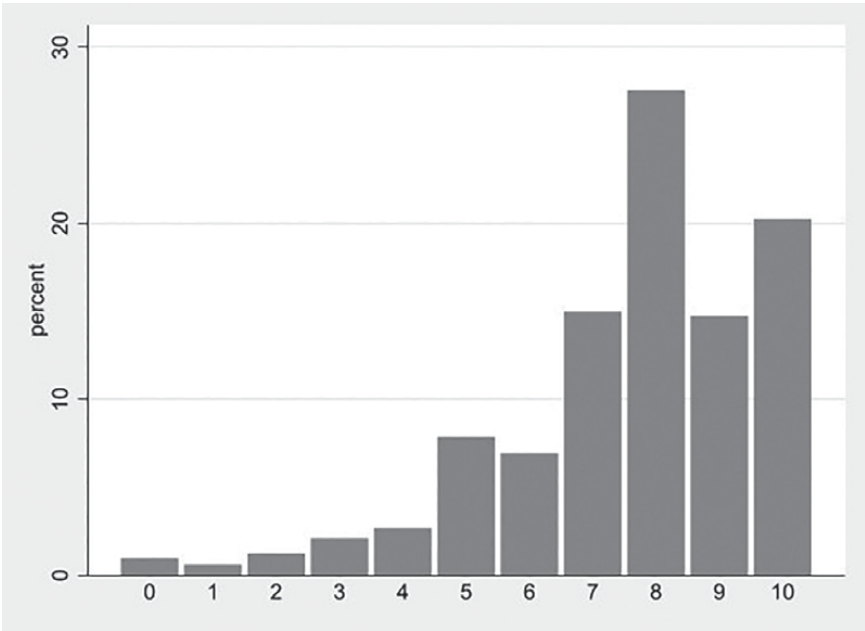
The survey data covers thirty-eight (of ninety-eight) Danish municipalities with subjective well-being as the central theme. In each municipality, we have survey data from approximately 1,000 respondents. The rich, individual-level register data, measuring sex, age, place of residence, education, income, members of household etc., covers all people with a permanent address in Denmark, and we can match this data with the survey data. Added to this data are also several municipality-level key measures. The design of the survey data set, with representative data from many municipalities all around the country, makes it possible for us to investigate the difference between urban and rural municipalities with multilevel analysis, and thereby better differentiate individual-level explanations from place-level explanations.

In the main analysis on differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas, we use a measure of life satisfaction on a zero-to-ten-point scale as the dependent variable. The overall distribution of this variable is depicted in [Figure 18.1](#). However, we will comment on a parallel analysis with a variable measuring the affect dimension of subjective well-being too. Furthermore, we include variables on the eudaimonic dimension as independent variables in the final regression model.

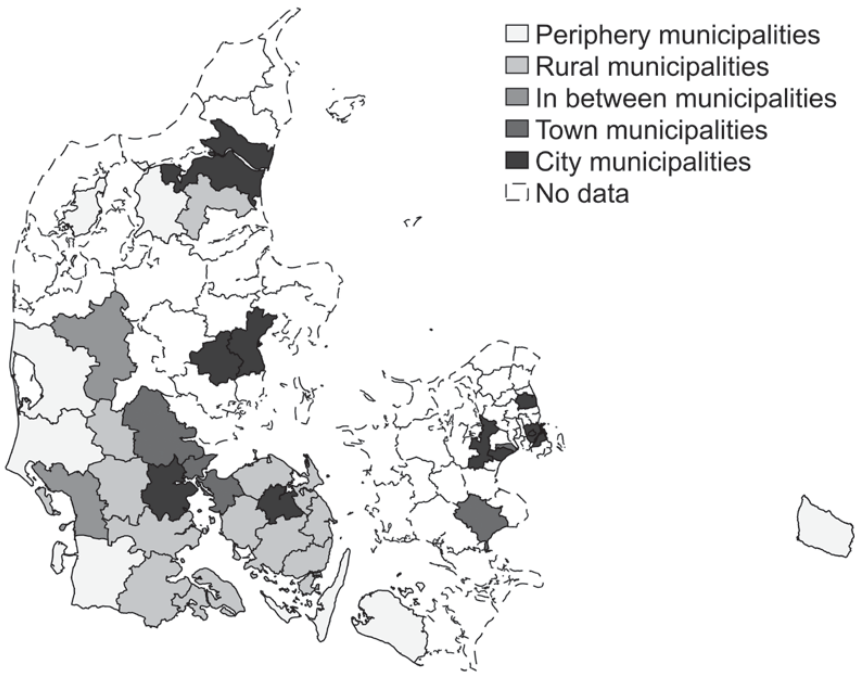
As the primary independent variable, measuring the urban–rural continuum, we use a municipality typology with five categories. The graphical distribution of these municipalities is shown in [Figure 18.2](#) with a depiction of the municipality typology.

The primary research agenda is to investigate the distribution of levels of subjective well-being from urban (dark) to rural (light). In [Figure 18.3](#) we show how the case municipalities distribute along factors that according to the theory could affect the feeling of well-being. It is apparent that these distributions to a high degree match the pattern in [Figure 18.1](#), which shows the urban–rural typology. For instance, the periphery municipalities and the rural municipalities have had negative or zero population change in the years up to the survey period, they have a small proportion of higher-educated people, and they have a low Gini-coefficient, i.e. low level of inequality. However, whether this overall pattern suppresses the feeling of well-being in rural municipalities is hard to say. Furthermore, do rural areas then have resilience to resist this pressure (Scott, 2013; Li et al., 2019)?

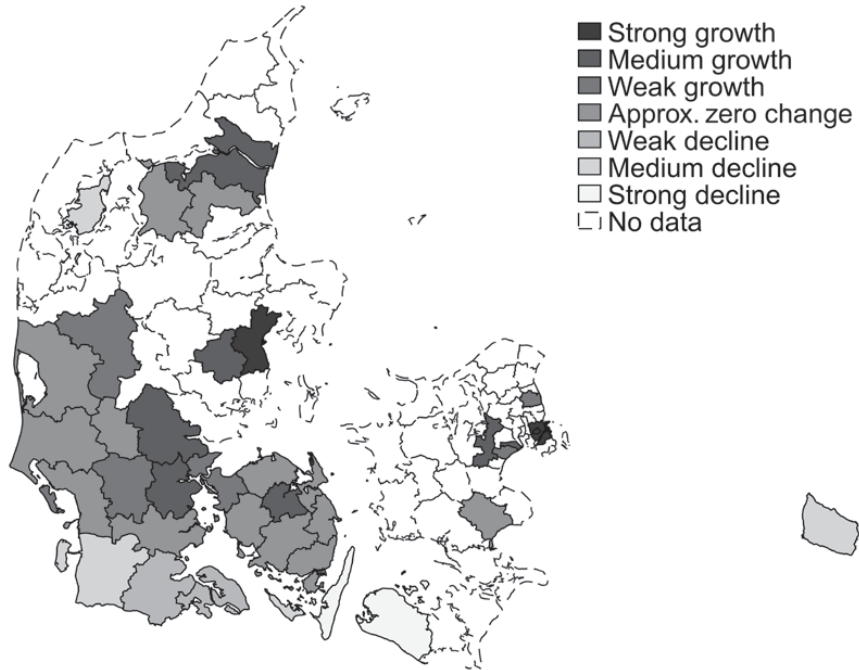
In some of the analyses discussed below, we collapse some of the typology categories and even use a single urban–rural dummy variable. Measuring



**Figure 18.1** Distribution of life satisfaction, population weighted. Exact wording of survey question (translated from Danish): All in all, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? 0 = Not at all satisfied; 10 = Fully satisfied.



**Figure 18.2** The thirty-eight Danish municipalities included in the survey data from 2015. Approximately 1,000 respondents from each of the thirty-eight municipalities.



**Figure 18.3** Graphical distribution of three municipality characteristics. (a) Population change in per cent 2007–2016. (b) Higher education (post-graduate) in per cent among 30+ years old. (c) Gini-coefficients.

the urban–rural dimension on the level of municipality alone could be problematic. Also, in city municipalities, one can live in the countryside. The degree of urbanisation and the centre–periphery dimension is of course strongly correlated. However, they are surely not the same thing. It would not be far-fetched to hypothesise a negative effect on well-being from periphery together with a positive effect from living outside dense urbanised areas. This is just a special case of the hypothesis about the countryside borrowing from the city, having the best of both worlds. For this reason, we include an individual-level variable from Statistics Denmark measuring degree of urbanisation at place of residence. This variable is originally on an ordinal scale in thirteen categories from city-area in the capital to place of residence with fewer than 200 inhabitants. However, we use it as a dummy variable, indicating whether the respondent is living either in a small village or in an area with fewer than 200 inhabitants.

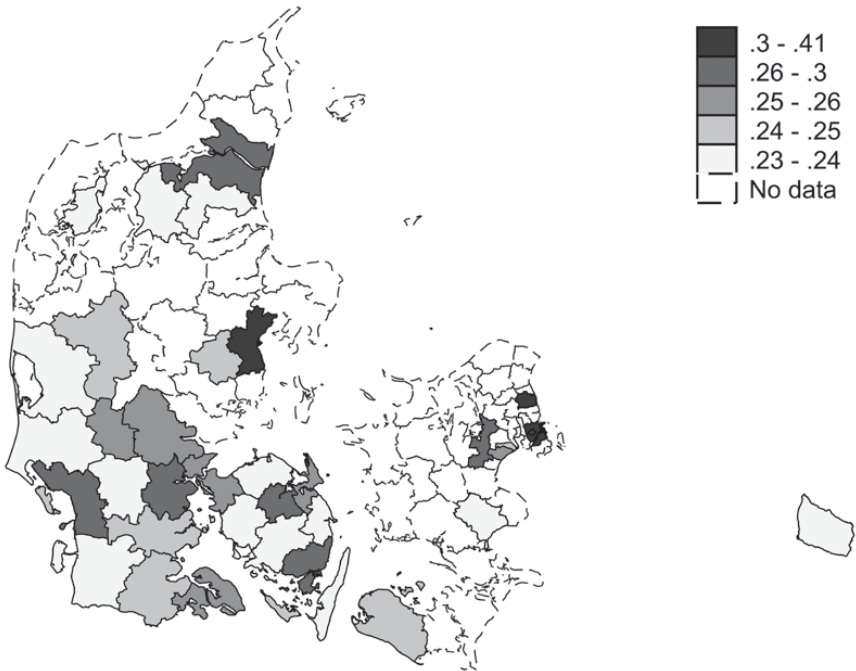
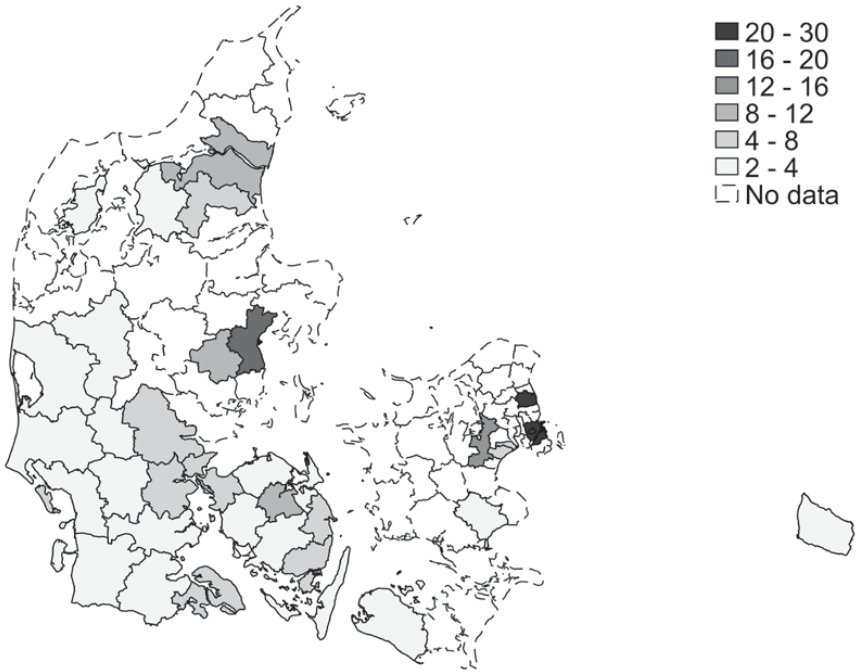


Figure 18.3 (cont.)

## Results

We now present the results from the analyses of differences between urban and rural areas in subjective well-being. In the first part of this section, we use a series of regression models to explore differences in life satisfaction between urban and rural areas. In the regression models, we include several explanatory background factors that could possibly also explain some of the difference in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas. In the following subsection, we investigate potential mediating factors. Then we redo some of the analyses from the first subsection with different dimensions of subjective well-being and with several different domain satisfaction measures as dependent variables. In the last subsection, we test the hypotheses about specific groups of people, for instance young single men in rural areas, and we analyse subjective well-being in relation to different migration patterns.

### *Difference in life satisfaction between urban and rural areas*

Because of the hierarchical structure of the data, with respondents embedded in municipalities, we use multilevel regression analysis. By way of this, we can investigate two kinds of variation in the dependent variable, variation between respondents in the different municipalities and variation between municipalities. Apart from the extra possibilities with multilevel analysis in comparison with ordinary regression analysis, we reduce the risk of bias in the estimation of regression coefficients and standard errors.

However, using life satisfaction on a zero-to-ten-point scale as dependent variable, it turns out that it does not matter much for the results whether we use multilevel regression or ordinary regression. Although we see a lot of variation in the dependent variable, nearly all of this variation is between individuals and not between municipalities. It is a bit surprising that the variation in average level of life satisfaction between municipalities was *that* small. However, and as discussed above, there are reasons to believe that differences in average life satisfaction between Danish municipalities would not be pronounced either.

In [Table 18.1](#), we show the results from five regression models, where we successively include blocks of independent variables across the models. As just discussed above, we find only a minor variance in life satisfaction between municipalities. Still, however, the municipality typology has some explanatory power, as we show in the results from model 1. The level of life satisfaction in the *periphery* municipalities, the *rural* municipalities and the *in-between* municipalities is statistically significant, higher than the level of life satisfaction in the *city* and *town* municipalities. In model 2, we

**Table 18.1** Effect from urban–rural municipality typology on life satisfaction. Multilevel linear regression. N=38,524<sup>A</sup> (thirty-eight municipalities).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5 <sup>B</sup>
<b>Cons</b>	7.57***	7.57***	7.92***	7.79***	1.42***
<b>Municipality typology</b>	***	***	***	***	***
City municipality (ref.)	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Town municipality	.00 <sup>NS</sup>	.00 <sup>NS</sup>	-.03 <sup>NS</sup>	.01 <sup>NS</sup>	.03 <sup>NS</sup>
In-between municipality	.16***	.16***	.13***	.17***	.08***
Rural municipality	.11***	.11***	.04 <sup>NS</sup>	.09***	.04*
Periphery municipality	.14***	.14***	.07 <sup>NS</sup>	.13***	.06***
<b>In the countryside</b>		-.00 <sup>NS</sup>	-.02 <sup>NS</sup>	-.04 <sup>NS</sup>	-.05***
<b>Woman</b>			-.03 <sup>NS</sup>	.02 <sup>NS</sup>	-.04*
<b>Age</b>			***	***	***
18–29 (ref.)			.00	.00	.00
30–39			-.23***	-.27***	-.11***
40–49			-.30***	-.39***	-.15***
50–59			-.27***	-.38***	-.15***
60–69			.22***	.09 <sup>NS</sup>	-.06 <sup>NS</sup>
70–79			.31***	.18*	-.03 <sup>NS</sup>
80+			.13 <sup>NS</sup>	.02 <sup>NS</sup>	.00 <sup>NS</sup>
<b>Marital status</b>			***	***	***
Married (ref.)			.00	.00	.00
Cohabiting			-.21***	-.15***	-.05 <sup>NS</sup>
Widowed and single			-.27***	-.21***	-.14***
Divorced and single			-.67***	-.46***	-.20***
Single			-.77***	-.48***	-.13***
<b>Education</b>				*	***
Primary school (ref.)				.00	.00
Secondary school				.00 <sup>NS</sup>	-.03 <sup>NS</sup>
Further education, short				-.09 <sup>NS</sup>	-.07*
Higher education				-.07*	-.18***

*(continued)*



Table 18.1 (Cont.)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5 <sup>B</sup>
<b>Labour marked status</b>				***	***
Self-employed (ref.)				.00	.00
Employee				.05 <sup>NS</sup>	.18***
Assisting spouse				.68***	.43***
Unemployed				-1.22***	-.06 <sup>NS</sup>
Maternity leave				.68***	.77***
Cash assistance				-2.14***	-.01 <sup>NS</sup>
Rehabilitation				-2.24***	.09 <sup>NS</sup>
Early retirement				-.72***	.39***
Pensioner				.02 <sup>NS</sup>	.16***
Student				-.28***	.05 <sup>NS</sup>
Others, outside workforce				-.43***	.11 <sup>NS</sup>
<b>Equivalent income</b>				***	NS
1. quantile (ref.)				.00	.00
2. quantile				.12**	.03 <sup>NS</sup>
3. quantile				.22***	.03 <sup>NS</sup>
4. quantile				.39***	.01 <sup>NS</sup>

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.005

<sup>A</sup>In model 5 a little less: 36,805

<sup>B</sup>Model 5 continues in Table 18.2

include an individual measured variable for living in the countryside. In all the included types in the municipality typology, a respondent can have residence in an area with an urban character or out in the countryside. As we discussed above, measuring instead the urban–rural continuum with an individual-level variable could potentially be a better choice in the investigation of an urban–rural happiness divide than by measuring at the municipality level. However, as is apparent from the results, this variable is not statistically significant, and it does not change the coefficients for the municipality typology at all.

In models 3 and 4 we include six individual-level categorical background variables to investigate whether compositional effects can explain

the difference in life satisfaction between urban and rural municipalities. As can be seen from model 3, gender is statistically insignificant, but age and marital status show rather strong and highly statistically significant effects, and these two variables explain a large part of the difference between urban and rural municipalities in life satisfaction. Older people, 60 years and above, are, on average and as expected, more satisfied with life than are younger people, and there is a larger proportion of older people in the rural municipalities. Furthermore, singles and divorced people are on average less satisfied with life than others, and the proportion of these two groups is larger in the urban municipalities.

In model 4, the variable for education is insignificant. From prior research, this was also expected. However, and as expected too, marital status, labour market status and income are statistically significant. The effect from these variables together nearly turns the urban–rural differences in life satisfaction back to the level from model 2. The urban municipalities have a marginally larger proportion of unemployed and people on cash assistance and rehabilitation, which actually explains a bit more of the higher life satisfaction in rural municipalities, but what really matters in model 4 is a powerful explanatory and positive effect from income. Income is on average significantly higher in urban municipalities, especially the proportion of equivalent household income in the 4th quantile, also shown in [Figure 18.2](#), and the dummy variable for this category has a strong effect on life satisfaction. Adjusting for the higher proportion of households with high income in urban municipalities is the main reason why in model 4 we again see a difference in subjective well-being between urban and rural municipalities. In a model not shown, we also included a municipality-level variable measuring the proportion of households with high income. However, this variable is statistically insignificant, so the effect from income should be considered as mainly an individual-level effect, i.e. a compositional effect. Furthermore, we have checked the effect from two more municipality-level variables, proportion with higher education and a measure of the Gini-coefficient in the municipalities. In particular, one could expect an effect from the Gini-coefficient because inequality is found to affect happiness, although the findings have been mixed. Neither the Gini-coefficient nor the variable measuring proportion of people with higher education were anywhere near statistical significance.

The conclusion so far is that, when we just look at the differences in level of subjective well-being between urban and rural areas, people living in rural areas are on average slightly, but highly statistically significantly, more satisfied with life than are people living in urban areas. When we adjust for compositional factors, some of these factors make the difference larger, and others help to explain the difference. Income, especially, enlarges the difference, while age and marital status help explain it. Overall, the adjustments

of compositional effects do not change the difference in life satisfaction between urban and rural municipalities more than just marginally. At this point, we should mention that we also could consider the factors, which we here call *compositional* factors, to be *mediating factors*. For instance, the city life and environment could perhaps increase the ‘risk’ of becoming divorced. However, there is not a clear pattern between divorce percentages and city living. No matter what, when we compare individuals that are equal on all these different factors, people living in rural surroundings on average seems to be somewhat more satisfied with life than are people living in urban surroundings.

### *Mediating factors explaining the urban–rural well-being gap*

We now turn to factors that we probably should consider as being mediating factors more than control factors. In model 5, we include several variables measuring mostly respondents’ emotions, opinions and conceptions on different matters. From theory and prior empirical research, we expect some of these factors to help explain the higher level of subjective well-being in rural areas. This applies to an expectation of better social networks and feeling of attachment to place in rural areas, and on the other hand to an expectation of more stress, pollution, noise and fear of crime in the city. These expectations are discussed above and, more thoroughly, in the framing essay to this section. Other variables are included here because of notoriously strong effects on subjective well-being. This applies to the respondent’s own perception of his or her health status and for the measure of autonomy and meaning in life, both of which related to the eudaimonic dimension of subjective well-being. Originally, these variables are scaled differently, some on a four- or five-point ordinal scale and others on a zero-to-ten scale. However, we have recoded all of them to have a minimum of zero and a maximum of one. We show the effect on life satisfaction from all these variables in Table 18.2, and the model is a continuation of model 5 in Table 18.1.

Four variables have effects above one point on life satisfaction, *meaning in life*, *autonomy*, *appreciation of others* and *subjective health*, while two have effects above 0.5, *help from friends and family* and *feeling of stress*. That these variables have strong effects is expected, and the signs of the effects were expected too. If we look back on part one of this model in Table 18.2, the municipality typology is still highly statistically significant, with the three rural types more satisfied than the two urban municipality types. However, the effects from the three rural municipality types are more than halved. Now, the question is which of these variables help explain the higher average life satisfaction in rural municipalities after control for compositional effects.

**Table 18.2** Effects from feelings, opinions and beliefs.

	Model 5 <sup>A</sup>
Subjective health (1 = 'best health')	1.20***
Feeling stress (1 = most stress, 'every day')	-.62***
Social contacts (1 = 'every day')	-.10*
Help from friends and family (1 = 'always someone to talk with and not alone')	.72***
Voluntary work (1 = 'every day')	.05 <sup>NS</sup>
Exercising (1 = 'every day')	.00 <sup>NS</sup>
Pollution, noise and smell (1 = 'every day')	.01 <sup>NS</sup>
Income to serve needs (1 = 'very easy to pay bills and money enough')	.32***
Trust in local politicians (1 = 'very high trust')	-.04 <sup>NS</sup>
Trust in local service (1 = 'very high trust')	.18***
Trust national politicians (1 = 'very high trust')	.16***
Social trust (1 = 'trust people very much')	.17***
Feeling of safety outside at night (1 = 'very high degree')	-.11 <sup>NS</sup>
Crime in local area (1 = 'very high degree')	.10***
Meaning in life (1 = 'complete')	2.79***
Autonomy (1 = 'very high degree')	2.15***
Appreciation of others (1 = 'very high degree')	1.25***

<sup>A</sup>This model is continued from Table 18.1, model 5.

Note: All independent variables in this table are scaled from zero to one.

To investigate which variables are mainly responsible for the explanation of the difference in life satisfaction between urban and rural municipalities, we have made a *Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition* of the effects (Jann, 2008). The results from this analysis (not shown) reveal that *subjective health* actually widens the gap between urban and rural municipalities statistically significantly. The main responsible factors for *explaining*, i.e. diminishing, the gap are a lower average level of *feeling of stress* in rural municipalities and a higher average level of *meaning in life*. The other factors have only marginal explanatory power.

We can also consider domain satisfaction as mediating factors explaining differences in overall satisfaction with life between urban and rural areas. For this reason, we have made parallel analyses with just domain satisfaction

measures as independent variables instead. The domains are (1) economic situation, (2) family life, (3) social relations, (4) work, (5) transport time to work, (6) amount of spare time, (7) daily life, (8) possibilities for leisure time activities and (9) housing situation. At first, we ran the analyses without domains 4 and 5, including all respondents. Afterwards, we ran them again with the inclusion of these two domains, but only for employed people. In both setups, two domain satisfaction measures clearly stand out in explaining the overall higher level of life satisfaction in rural areas, namely satisfaction with daily life and satisfaction with family life. To a lesser degree, satisfaction with social relations is also an explanatory factor.

### *Domain satisfaction and different dimensions of subjective well-being*

While we can consider domain satisfaction as mediating variables with overall life satisfaction as the dependent variable, it is also relevant to treat the variables measuring domain satisfaction as *dependent* variables. We have run a series of regression analyses with all domain satisfaction measures plus the measures for the other dimensions on subjective well-being as dependent variables. We show the effect from municipality typology and living in the countryside from all these analyses in [Table 18.3](#). The effects shown are controlled for the same background variables as in model 4 in [Table 18.1](#).

The general picture from these regression analyses on well-being domains is that respondents living in the three rural municipality types on average are statistically significantly more satisfied than are respondents in the city municipalities. Moreover, this tendency is greatest for the periphery municipality type. This applies to satisfaction with family life, social relations, job, commuting time, amount of spare time, everyday life and housing situation. Only concerning the possibilities for spare time activities is this general pattern reversed, which fits well with the higher supply of many kinds of cultural activities like sports, coffee shops, restaurants, museums, etc. On this domain, we also see a rather strong and highly statistically significant lower level of satisfaction among respondents living in the countryside, no matter the type of municipality. Besides, there is a highly statistically negative effect from the countryside dummy on satisfaction with the personal economic situation too.

Looking at the regression analyses on different dimensions of subjective well-being, it is the same overall picture, though more diffused. Without going into detail, there is an average tendency that, in rural municipality types, life is felt to be more meaningful, there is more joy, less anxiety and less feeling of depression. Furthermore, the effect estimates from the countryside dummy show a statistically significant more pronounced feeling of meaning in life, less anxiety and less feeling of depression in the countryside.

**Table 18.3** Effect from municipality types and living in the countryside. Multilevel linear regression with samples from thirty-eight municipalities. Control from all background variables included in model 4, Table 1. All dependent variables are here scaled from zero to ten.

	Municipality typology (ref. = city)					N
	Town	In between	Rural	Periphery	Country-side	
<b>DEPENDENT VARIABLES:</b>						
<b>Domain satisfaction</b>						
<i>Satisfaction with ...</i>						
personal economic situation	.00 <sup>NS</sup>	.08 <sup>NS</sup>	.05 <sup>NS</sup>	.09 <sup>NS</sup>	-.12 <sup>***</sup>	38,546
family life	.04 <sup>NS</sup>	.17 <sup>***</sup>	.08 <sup>*</sup>	.14 <sup>**</sup>	-.00 <sup>NS</sup>	38,523
social relations	.04 <sup>*</sup>	.04 <sup>NS</sup>	.06 <sup>NS</sup>	.09 <sup>***</sup>	.04 <sup>NS</sup>	38,496
job	.05 <sup>NS</sup>	.01 <sup>NS</sup>	.11 <sup>*</sup>	.19 <sup>***</sup>	.03 <sup>NS</sup>	19,077
commuting time	.13 <sup>NS</sup>	.40 <sup>***</sup>	.39 <sup>**</sup>	.48 <sup>***</sup>	.03 <sup>NS</sup>	18,964
amount of spare time	-.00 <sup>NS</sup>	.14 <sup>**</sup>	.09 <sup>NS</sup>	.20 <sup>***</sup>	-.06 <sup>NS</sup>	22,211
everyday life	.02 <sup>NS</sup>	.18 <sup>***</sup>	.10 <sup>**</sup>	.17 <sup>***</sup>	.03 <sup>NS</sup>	38,562
possibilities for spare-time activities	-.26 <sup>NS</sup>	.19 <sup>**</sup>	-.21 <sup>**</sup>	-.35 <sup>**</sup>	-.45 <sup>***</sup>	38,003
housing situation	.01 <sup>NS</sup>	.18 <sup>***</sup>	.14 <sup>**</sup>	.20 <sup>***</sup>	.01 <sup>NS</sup>	38,568
<b>Dimensions of subjective well-being</b>						
Meaning in life	-.02 <sup>NS</sup>	.09 <sup>***</sup>	.08 <sup>*</sup>	.12 <sup>***</sup>	.08 <sup>**</sup>	38,441
Appreciation by others	-.02 <sup>NS</sup>	.02 <sup>NS</sup>	.07 <sup>*</sup>	.06 <sup>NS</sup>	.01 <sup>NS</sup>	38,434
Autonomy	-.04 <sup>NS</sup>	.14 <sup>***</sup>	.04 <sup>NS</sup>	.02 <sup>NS</sup>	.02 <sup>NS</sup>	38,408
Joyful	.03 <sup>NS</sup>	.19 <sup>***</sup>	.11 <sup>**</sup>	.16 <sup>***</sup>	.02 <sup>NS</sup>	38,517
Anxious	-.05 <sup>NS</sup>	-.09 <sup>NS</sup>	-.13 <sup>*</sup>	-.16 <sup>*</sup>	-.11 <sup>**</sup>	38,496
Depressed	.00 <sup>NS</sup>	-.06 <sup>NS</sup>	-.08 <sup>NS</sup>	-.10 <sup>NS</sup>	-.11 <sup>**</sup>	38,485

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.005

*Specific groups, migration and subjective well-being*

Earlier we discussed some hypotheses regarding specific groups of people and about migration and subjective well-being. For instance, we discussed the young generation in the city, single younger men in rural areas and elderly people migrating from urban to rural areas. Although we have a very large number of respondents, it becomes difficult to analyse some of these groups. Investigating subjective well-being differences between urban and rural areas for specific groups is usually not problematic for us. However, when we investigate specific groups of *migrants*, the number of respondents gets rather small. This counts, for instance, for the elderly urban–rural immigrants. Only 101 respondents between 58 and 72 years of age had moved from a city area to the countryside during the three-year period before the survey interviews, and just 82 of these could be matched properly with similar people staying in the city. None of the analysed subjective well-being effects from elderly migrating from city to countryside were statistically significant either.

In general, when analysing the urban–rural gap in subjective well-being for specific groups, we do not find any pattern that markedly and statistically significantly stands out in comparison with the overall pattern. For instance, there is no indication that the younger generation should be happier and more satisfied with life if they live in the city. This is also the case when analysing the migration effect on subjective well-being measures. In [Table 18.4](#) we show a series of matching comparisons of urban–rural migration as well as rural–urban migration.

There are no statistically significant effects on subjective well-being measures when analysing urban–rural migrants matched with urban stayers, and the same applies with rural–urban migrants matched with rural stayers. Only two effects from [Table 18.4](#) are statistically significant. Urban–rural migrants are weakly statistically significantly more worried and feeling sad than are comparable rural dwellers.

## Conclusions

We stated two main hypotheses about differences in subjective well-being between local Danish areas. First, that in the geographically small, highly developed universal Danish welfare state, with an advanced inter-municipal equalisation system, there would be no large differences in subjective well-being between local areas. Second, that any found differences between local areas would, on average, be with rural municipalities having higher levels of subjective well-being. A higher level of subjective well-being would be in

**Table 18.4** ‘Effect’ from migration (urban–rural and rural–urban). Coarsened exact matching<sup>1</sup>, each with two different comparison groups.

	Urban–rural migrants		Rural–urban migrants	
	(N=690)	(N=687)	(N=553)	(N=558)
	1 Vs urban stayers	2 Vs rural inhabitants	3 Vs rural stayers	4 Vs urban inhabitants
Effect on:				
Life satisfaction	–.03 <sup>NS</sup>	–.13 <sup>NS</sup>	–.09 <sup>NS</sup>	–.01 <sup>NS</sup>
Feeling joy yesterday	–.03 <sup>NS</sup>	–.16 <sup>NS</sup>	–.03 <sup>NS</sup>	.05 <sup>NS</sup>
Feeling worried	–.04 <sup>NS</sup>	.24*	.19 <sup>NS</sup>	.05 <sup>NS</sup>
Feeling sad yesterday	.00 <sup>NS</sup>	.21*	.11 <sup>NS</sup>	–.06 <sup>NS</sup>

\* $p < .05$ 

Matched on sex, age, marital status, education, labour market status and income.

<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, Blackwell et al. (2009), King & Nielsen (2019).

accordance with the general trend in Western countries, where rural areas are able to ‘borrow’ the positive effects from big cities and at the same time still possess the values from the natural environment, social capital, lower fear of crime etc. Both main hypotheses were supported. There were only minor differences in subjective well-being between municipalities. However, on average, the rural municipalities had statistically higher levels of subjective well-being, and the higher average level of subjective well-being in rural areas was still highly statistically significant after controlling for several background variables measuring age, marital status, income etc.

In the main analysis of these differences, presented in Table 18.1, we used a zero-to-ten-point measure of life satisfaction. However, the higher level of subjective well-being was also seen in other subjective well-being dimensions and in nearly all domain satisfaction measures. Only regarding possibilities for spare time activities did city municipalities score higher on average. A lower level of experienced stress and a higher level of feeling meaning in life in rural municipalities were able to explain the higher level of satisfaction with life in rural municipalities. However, the difference in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas should not be overstated, and of course neither should the factors explaining this difference. At least as important is the fact that Denmark has quite a high degree of equality in subjective well-being between geographical areas. This also applies to specific groups, for instance highly educated people,



young people and people with low income. Likewise, there is not much difference in subjective well-being between urban–rural migrants and statistically matched stayers in the city, and the same can be said the other way around with rural–urban migrants.

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## Subjective well-being in rural and urban Italy: comparing two survey waves (2008–2018)

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### Introduction

Since the early 2000s, many disciplines have begun to examine urban and rural differences and to investigate the relationship between well-being and the degree of urbanisation of the place where individuals live. From sociologists to economists, from urban planners to psychologists and medical researchers, all are providing evidence on how well-being is determined by different factors and how well-being varies across countries.

The purpose of this chapter, which is a population-based country study based on two survey waves (2008 and 2018), is to examine how individual subjective well-being may have changed over ten years in the urban and rural contexts in Italy. Building on the results of the first survey wave (2008), the most prominent result of which was a better score of the general perception of well-being for the rural dwellers (Viganò et al., 2019), which was partially consistent with similar results at European and extra-European level, we wished to answer the following research questions: first, what are the most significant determinants of well-being in the two areas, and second, whether significant changes have occurred both in absolute terms (change in perception of well-being) and in more specific terms, i.e. considering the variability of the variables over ten years.

The chapter develops as follows: in the first section we report the main literature evidence on the key topics related to differences in urban and rural well-being; the second section introduces the methodology adopted and clarifies the survey results in a comparative perspective; the third section analyses and discusses the survey data; and the final section presents conclusions.

### Differences in rural and urban well-being and well-being determinants

The literature on well-being in urban and rural areas is articulated around three main positions, all of which are supported by empirical studies: urban

researchers, championed by the work of Glaeser (2011), report the major benefits of city life, iconised by the agglomeration effect and the prevailing industrial growth scheme (higher economic production, a more dynamic labour market and consequently more job opportunities, higher salaries, higher rate of innovation and creativity and more access to goods and services of various types, e.g. institutional, educational, financial and cultural) (Fujita & Thisse, 1996; Morrison, 2011; Glaeser, 2011; Morris, 2019). The negative counterparts of living in an urban setting are well-known and decried under the wording ‘urban malaise’ (Wirth, 1938; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Mazelis, 2018; Mouratidis, 2019; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2020): the increase in inequalities (higher costs of living and new forms of poverty) and social exclusion, and the diverse impacts on the environment (e.g. negative externalities in terms of pollution, environmental legacy and a denser and more crowded environment).

On the other hand, the ‘ruralists’ highlight how life in a less urbanised context can have several positive effects, while taking into account certain limitations related to the provision of services, job opportunities, culture, etc. in rural areas (Glendinning et al., 2003; Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010; Brereton et al., 2011; Sørensen, 2014; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015). Among the most relevant arguments in favour of rural areas is the relationship with the environment in relation to quality of life. The quality and quantity of the environment, along with the interactions between humans and the natural, anthropic spaces, are fundamental to the perception of quality of life and well-being (Hegetschweiler et al., 2017). In this perspective, there is strong evidence of the positive effect of living close to the natural environment, green areas, parks and the general ecosystem which speaks in favour of living in rural areas rather than in urban (Van den Berg et al., 2003; Lawson, 2009; Berman et al., 2008, 2012; Maller et al., 2006; Wheeler et al., 2012; White et al., 2013).

Additionally, a number of studies showed that there is no significant difference between subjective well-being in rural and urban areas (Burger et al., 2020; Sørensen, 2014; Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011). Among the determinants of well-being in relation to urban–rural area as place of residence that have been considered by scholars, without necessarily placing the contributions within the three positions mentioned above, the following should therefore be considered. Among the factors affecting individual psychological well-being in relation to the conurbation of the anthropic space, it is worth mentioning the quality of housing (Evans, 2003), the concentration of physical infrastructure (Barton, 2009; Mouratidis, 2019), the infrastructural density in relation to the rate of criminality (Mendez & Otero, 2018) and the lack of spaces for interaction and recreation (Boyko & Cooper, 2011). With regard to this last aspect, it is observed that the deficit of socio-spatial spaces encourages poor behaviour and perceptions in people

living in high-density spaces, with reduced cognitive and social functioning (Gifford, 2007; Mouratidis, 2019). In this respect the living conditions of rural dwellers appear superior since they inhabit a less crowded and stressful environment (Gilbert et al., 2016).

Another relevant dimension which has been widely investigated in the literature on social capital is social and community engagement. Starting with the seminal work of Putnam (2000; Putnam et al., 1993), networks, norms and trust are highlighted as the main relevant factors for the social and economic growth of communities. As noted by Portela et al. (2013), the quantity of social capital may increase the perception of individual well-being, given the satisfaction deriving from the social engagement opportunities with others and the perception of being locally connected to the social context.

Following on from the initial hypothesis of higher social capital in rural areas suggested by Putnam (2000; Putnam et al., 1993), the presence of social capital, articulated in different ways in urban and rural areas, becomes an important factor to be taken into account (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998; Beugelsdijk & Van Schaik, 2005; Léon, 2005; Sørensen, 2012, 2014, 2016). A positive perception of place is linked to the economic and social opportunities provided by the environment, but also to the sense of inclusion within a community, which corresponds to a more cohesive social capital (Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Morrison, 2011; Ballas & Tranmer, 2012; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015; Rishbeth et al., 2019). The proxy that some standard studies have used to measure social capital is participation in associations and voluntary activities (Putnam et al., 1993; Sørensen, 2012) as a measure of trust. Community engagement is also signalled as a counterbalance to offset the isolation effect in the rural context (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998; Ziersch et al., 2009).

Additional elements which may affect subjective well-being are related to cultural and sports activities. Several studies have highlighted the influence of these elements as well-being determinants, like the propensity towards attending exhibitions or playing an instrument, or the tendency to practice sports (Glaeser et al., 2001; Michalos & Kahlke, 2008; Easterlin et al., 2011; Grossi et al., 2012). In this respect, it emerges that cultural experience seems to have a noticeable impact on individuals, and the intensity of participation and consumption is significantly correlated to the subjective perception of well-being, highlighting culture as one of the main determinants, after health status and income.

Practicing sports has also become one of the main supports in relation to the development of health policies in Western countries over the last thirty years, given the opportunity to prevent health problems and reduce costs for the health system. Sports participation has been demonstrated to have

a positive effect upon individual well-being (Downward & Rasciute, 2011) and the effect increases if the activity chosen is shared with others, which in addition allows social interaction (Cleland et al., 2015).

When thinking of the provision of cultural and sports activities, the urban areas and the conurbation display a higher concentration of supplies like shops, sports facilities, cultural facilities, museums etc. (Insch & Florek, 2010; Zenker et al., 2013; Tavano Blessi et al., 2016).

The size of conurbation and the dimension of the living place have recently been investigated in empirical studies showing how satisfaction or dissatisfaction can be variously related to the size of cities, towns or villages. Numerous studies show greater dissatisfaction linked to city life, as already reported (Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Mazelis, 2018; Mouratidis, 2019; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2020), according to the size of conurbation, while in smaller settlements, villages or small towns people seem to be more satisfied (Ballas & Tranmer, 2012; Requena, 2016; Viganò et al., 2019; Burger et al., 2020).

## Methods

The analysis is based on two survey waves carried out in 2008 and 2018, both conducted on a sample of 1,500 citizens selected to be representative of the Italian population. In order to analyse and evaluate the determinants of the subjective well-being in the two environments, the two surveys were based on the same questionnaire, addressed to a statistically representative sample of Italian residents equally distributed in the urban and rural areas. The survey was based on the PGWBI (Psychological General Wellbeing Index) questionnaire,<sup>1</sup> an instrument targeted specifically at measuring individual subjective well-being and used for the evaluation of the impact of different determinants.

The questionnaire collected a sample of the main socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education, income, diseases, employment and civil status (Table 19.1). In line with what has emerged in the literature

1 The Psychological General Well-Being Index (PGWBI) is a tool to measure self-representations of intra-personal affective or emotional states reflecting a sense of subjective well-being or distress, and thus captures what we could call a subjective perception of well-being. The original PGWBI consists of twenty-two self-administered items, rated on a six-point mood, positive well-being and self-control (see Dupuy, 1990). In this chapter, we have adopted the short form of PGWBI, consisting of six items that generally explain more than 92 per cent of the global variance of the questionnaire. This short version has been validated in a long-term project carried out from 2000 to 2006 in Italy (see Grossi et al., 2006).

**Table 19.1** Sample characteristics.

2008 Survey wave	N	%	% Italian population (Istat, 2011)	2018 Survey wave	N	%	% Italian population (Istat, 2018)
<b>GENDER</b>				<b>GENDER</b>			
Male	726	48	48	Male	727	48	48.7
Female	779	52	52	Female	777	52	51.3
<b>AGE GROUPS</b>				<b>AGE GROUPS</b>			
• 15–17	53	3.5	3.5	• 15–17	20	1.3	3.8
• 18–34	397	26.4	24.2	• 18–34	250	16.6	19.2
• 35–54	507	33.7	35.0	• 35–54	559	37.1	29.6
• 55 +	548	36.4	37.3	• 55 +	675	44.8	36.6
<b>LOCATION</b>				<b>LOCATION</b>			
North	690	45.8	45.8	North	724	48.1	46.3
Centre	295	19.6	19.8	Centre	293	19.4	19.7
South	520	34.6	34.4	South	481	31.9	33.7

about the determinants of well-being, four indexes (or composite indicators) were identified for this study, with the purpose of showing their variation in the different territorial contexts, also taking into account the dimension of the living environment.

Each index has been calculated through the aggregation of the results of specific sub-questions:

- **Cultural Index:** Fifteen questions related to participation in cultural activities such as theatre, museums, exhibitions, cinema, reading a book, music etc. in terms of frequency per year in a scale from 0 to 365 (the value of the index is given by the sum of the results).
- **Health Index:** the presence (1) or absence (0) of selected diseases as listed in the PGWBI questionnaire.
- **Social Index:** Two questions related to participation in social and community activity and engagement in volunteer organisations in terms of frequency per year on a scale from 0 to 365 (the value of the index is given by the sum of the results).
- **Sports Index:** Two questions related to the intensity of practicing sports and physical activity in terms of frequency per years on a scale from 0 to 365 (the value of the index is given by the sum of the results).

We have employed linear statistical techniques related to univariate analysis (Pearson's) in order to describe the difference in terms of impact on individual subjective well-being. In relation to it, we underline that the difference is not reported in terms of effect size, but refers to the incidence that each determinant analysed may provide in relation to the well-being

**Table 19.2** Rural/urban sample sizes.

2008 <5,000 (rural)	2008 >100,000 (urban)	2018 <5,000 (rural)	2018 >100,000 (urban)
276	329	270	337

perception. [Table 19.1](#) provides the whole sample characteristics compared to the general Italian population for the national survey in 2011 and 2018.

In order to define the urban and rural scale and to ring-fence the sample ([Table 19.2](#)), we have taken two different methodological steps: first, we have employed administrative data (Istat census) to locate the respondents (objective number of inhabitants per urbanisation level); second, acting on the suggestion of Sørensen (2012), we have defined four cut-offs (settlements with fewer than 5,000; 5,001–20,000; 20,001–100,000; more than 100,000); and then defined four categories of human settlements: rural, semi-rural, semi-urban and urban areas. [Table 19.2](#) provides evidence on the number of rural and urban dwellers considered in the sample.

For the present study, in order to focus more sharply on rural and urban contexts, we have concentrated our analysis on the two greatly contrasting territorial areas, employing linear statistical techniques. [Table 19.3](#) presents the results of the linear correlation coefficients between the selected variables and the four indexes.

### Data analysis

The results presented come from the comparison of the correlation index obtained from the variables ([Table 19.3](#)) in the two waves (2008 and 2018). The four indexes and the main socio-demographic variables selected (gender, civil status, income, work typology and geography ([Table 19.3](#))) have been correlated to PGWBI through a linear correlation analysis, which allows us to outline the urban–rural differences and the different scoring of the variables in the two contexts.

The results of our analysis in the 2008 wave showed a better scoring of the general level of PGWBI in the rural context (with an interesting implication concerning the size of urban settlement in favour of small towns or villages with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants), reporting an average value of 79.353 for the rural areas and 77.516 for the urban (Viganò et al., 2019).

Ten years later (2018), the average value had changed by a small number of points, but the results are reversed: the rural average PGWBI is 77.823, while the urban is slightly increased, reaching the value of 78.560.



**Table 19.3** Linear correlation between selected variables and PGWBI (2008–2018).

	2008		2018	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
N	276	329	270	337
social indicator	-0.067	0.008	0.138*	0.102
cultural indicator	0.047	-0.01	0.105	0.155*
sports indicator	0.219*	0.086	0.26*	0.172*
health indicator	-0.267*	-0.174*	-0.252*	-0.23*
female	-0.179*	-0.071	-0.19*	-0.215*
male	0.179*	0.071	0.19*	0.215*
single	0.093	-0.023	-0.071	-0.052
married	-0.097	0.003	0.028	0.089
divorced	-0.014	0.101	0.118	-0.014
widowed	0.025	-0.032	-0.046	-0.002
student	0.021	0.008	0.034	-0.086
blue collar	-0.06	0.111*	-0.131*	-0.044
white collar	0.096	-0.119*	0.092	-0.025
retired	-0.022	0.053	0.018	0.102
income nd**	-0.064	-0.017	0.074	-0.076
income low	-0.039	0.013	0.016	-0.083
income average	0.056	0.081	-0.045	0.101
income high	0.112	-0.059	0.024	-0.038
North-West	-0.07	0.105	0.078	-0.039
North-East	0.126*	0.062	0.008	0.184*
Centre	0.006	-0.085	0.07	0.066
South and islands	-0.071	-0.072	-0.9	-0.13*

\*Statistically significant results

\*\*data not available

Although the result shows a slight decline in perceived well-being in rural areas and a slight improvement in urban areas, bringing the results of the most recent wave in line with studies proving little or no difference between urban and rural areas, what is more interesting is to observe which variables

have had a different impact over ten years and what dynamics are emerging in the different contexts.

One of the most noticeable changes concerns social dynamics, signalled by the social index. As far as the social dimension is concerned, identified in the literature as social capital and captured in our analysis through two questions related to social involvement of individuals in voluntary and community development activities, in 2008 this index was negative ( $-0.067$ ), but in ten years it became a significant factor ( $0.138$ , statistically significant), proving even stronger than the urban average value.

The results of the 2018 social index are aligned with the position of some scholars who claim 'smaller is better'. Voluntary work and associations, considered a proxy of social capital (Putnam, 2000; Sørensen, 2012), are increasing the level of well-being and strengthening trust and collaboration among the community's members (Glaeser et al., 2001; Uslander, 2008).

Another relevant change concerns the results of the cultural index. The cultural dimension, investigated through a set of questions concerning the individual consumption of and participation in cultural initiatives, is listed in the literature as a relevant aspect in promoting individual well-being (Grossi et al., 2012; Hyppä et al., 2006; Michalos & Kahlke, 2008; Tavano Blessi et al., 2016). From 2008 to 2018 the cultural index went from being a minor factor for well-being to becoming an element of proven relevance, meaning an increase in well-being linked to the consumption of recreational and cultural supply. The results appear statistically significant in urban areas in 2018, but culture counts as a determining variable for PGWBI also for the rural dwellers, who prove to be cultural consumers, regardless of the local availability of cultural supply.

The sports index, obtained by self-reported frequency of practicing physical/sports activities over one year, measured here on a scale from 0 to 365, is considerably higher in rural areas ( $0.219$  in 2008 and  $0.26$  in 2018), with an increase in the value of urban areas over the ten years. The literature shows that physical activity and access to nature are sources of physical and psychological well-being, and have a protective effect against diseases (Berman et al., 2008, 2012; Maller et al., 2006; White et al., 2013). The higher results in rural contexts can easily be explained by the presence of accessible green spaces and natural parks, which counterbalance less provision of sports and physical infrastructure (Stigsdotter et al., 2010).

As far as the health index is concerned, the strongest determinant of individual psychological well-being is the presence or absence of disease. In our analysis, the health index is given by the number of declared diseases, as sought in the PGWBI questionnaire. The results over ten years have increased in urban settings, meaning a worsening or a higher negative incidence of this variable on well-being. It might be observed that both rural and urban dwellers in the two waves present co-morbidity and a negative

**Table 19.4** Average level of individual well-being in the two contexts (two waves).

2008 (rural)	2008 (urban)	2018 (rural)	2018 (urban)
79,353	77,516	77,823	78,560

correlation with individual subjective well-being. The literature in this regard has highlighted the bilateral influence of positive well-being on individual health (Diener & Chan, 2011) and, conversely, how health condition and co-morbidity affect subjective well-being. In the two waves, results prove the relevance of this variable in both urban and rural contexts (in all the contexts and all the years considered the variable is statistically significant), despite the higher density of welfare and health infrastructure in the urban areas (McDonald et al., 2014). The Italian National Health System providing health services to the whole population can partially explain why the results do not present significant divergences.

Coming to single variables, it is worth considering the persistence and worsening of the gender gap in favour of men in both contexts. It should be observed that the female condition presents a strong negative correlation with the urban area, reversing the results of 2008, in which it was assumed the presence of better urban welfare services for the work–life balance of women.

Civil status is always difficult to interpret as the data over ten years present some small changes. None of the results are statistically significant, but we can observe that being single in a rural area steadily changed in ten years and worsened a little, while the condition of being married or divorced in rural areas seems to provide a positive effect in terms of well-being. In the urban area, the only value which strengthens the negative correlation with well-being seems to be being divorced. Being a student in an urban setting also leads to a negative correlation with well-being (in 2018).

Another relevant correlated factor of well-being is economic condition or income (Chu-Liang, 2009). Previous results reported greater hardship for low-income earners and higher advantage for high-income dwellers in rural areas, probably because of job type (clustered into the two main categories of white and blue collar). Over the ten years, considering the long shadow cast by the 2008 crisis, the perception of well-being worsened for low-income urban dwellers and improved for their rural counterparts, while it is significant to note that workers with average salaries (intermediate stage between white and blue collar such as manager or industry-employed workers) reported better well-being in urban areas.

A final point concerns the geographical distribution of well-being across regions which report a historical Italian divide between the northern part of Italy (which scores better for all the dimensions and the territorial contexts)

and the rest of Italy. Over ten years this situation was confirmed as far as southern Italy and the islands are concerned, while in central Italy urban areas are steadily improving their score.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, we have compared statistical data from two waves (2008 and 2018) concerning the perception of individual psychological well-being in rural and urban Italy. Population (number of inhabitants per scale of urbanisation) has been the objective criterion for classifying the clusters in our country study. The rationale for employing a cut-off scale has been the adaptation to the size of Italian towns and cities, the majority of which have fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. To make a more clear-cut choice for this chapter, we have selected the results of those rural areas corresponding to settlements with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants and the urban areas with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

Furthermore, our analysis has considered how the set of socio-demographic variables, together with the four indexes (social, cultural, health and sports index), might affect subjective well-being in the different environments.

The results of our comparative analysis show that in ten years the trend in perceived well-being, calculated in relation to the indices, the socio-demographic variables and the PGWBI, tends to rebalance between urban and rural areas, after a better performance in rural areas in 2008.

However, some factors have changed significantly, highlighting which features of well-being become most relevant: while the health and sports indexes confirm their relevance in both contexts, the social and cultural indexes are on the rise, specifically in the rural areas, phenomena that argue in favour of a value per se of these elements, notwithstanding the area of residence or the local supply of such services.

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## Subjective well-being in rural and urban areas under the COVID-19 crisis in France

*Marta Pasqualini*

### Introduction

The difference between urban and rural areas, in terms of standard of living and subjective well-being, is still being debated. If, on one hand, cities offer higher job opportunities, leisure activities and cultural events, on the other hand, they are characterised by higher cost of living, higher levels of pollution and greater wealth inequality. Thus, existing evidence is inconsistent and heterogeneous across time and countries. In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a global health crisis, infecting more than 210 million people and claiming more than 4 million lives in a couple of years (Worldometer, 2021). France was one of the first countries implementing measures to keep physical distance between individuals. Since public spaces were closed for a long time, the COVID pandemic, requiring everyone to be locked down at home, might have exacerbated the impact of living spaces on individuals' quality of life by widening urban–rural differences in subjective well-being.

By using a probability-based panel study, consisting of 1,404 individuals, we explored changes in subjective well-being over time, from the pre-pandemic period (2019) to about one year into the pandemic (April 2021). In addition, we investigated between-individuals differences based on rural–urban differential factors (i.e. compositional factors) and within-individuals differences based on events that have been experienced during the pandemic period (i.e. contextual factors). Quantitative findings suggest a short-term improvement of subjective well-being compared with the pre-lockdown period. Indeed, net of individual socio-economic and demographic characteristics, subjective well-being had slightly increased in the first phase of the lockdown, showing a peak in the summertime (end of May–early June), but a strong decline in the autumn, returning to initial values of the pre-lockdown phase, to increase again in the second lockdown phase (April 2021). By looking at changes of subjective well-being across different degrees of urbanisation, we have first distinguished rural areas or small towns, suburbs, small cities and large cities. Findings have generally revealed higher levels of subjective well-being in small areas, while



individuals living in large cities and, especially, in suburbs were among those who reported the lowest level of subjective well-being.

To identify potential mechanisms to explain this gap, we have first looked at between-individuals differences of subjective well-being, due to a set of compositional factors. Findings suggest that material conditions, social capital and physical environment only partially account for changes of subjective well-being over time and its difference across residential areas. Then we looked at within-individuals differences in subjective well-being over time according to specific factors associated with the COVID-19 lockdown. Findings suggest that, controlling for individual fixed effects, having had COVID-19 in the first period of lockdown (early April 2020) decreased subjective well-being among respondents, especially if living in cities, while having helped neighbours increased subjective well-being.

### **Subjective well-being in rural and urban areas**

The degree of urbanisation has been widely associated with economic growth and higher living standards. Therefore, many studies have also argued that living in cities would be associated with higher levels of happiness (Glaeser, 2011; Burger et al., 2020). However, with the generalised increase of wealth and the development of technology since World War II, the urban–rural differentials in happiness and well-being might have been reduced or even eliminated. Indeed, the individual’s average level of well-being in large cities has declined mainly because the pros due to urbanisation (economic development, job opportunities, etc.) are associated with higher costs of living, higher pollution, lower level of social capital and inequality. Thus, it is unclear why, although living in urban areas is associated with lower levels of life satisfaction (Rodríguez-Pose & Maslauskaitė, 2012), most people are migrating towards cities. This phenomenon has been called ‘the urban happiness paradox’ (Sørensen, 2021). The reasons behind higher levels of well-being in rural contexts have been extensively investigated. For example, some research has suggested that small towns are characterised by informal social contacts and a homogeneous population, which facilitate stronger social networks and good psychological health (De Vos et al., 2016). According to Hoogerbrugge and Burger (2020), other reasons can be drawn from a range of socio-economic, contextual and environmental factors since cities have higher levels of air pollution, noise of cars and public transport and a lack of green space. Finally, compared to smaller cities, large urban areas often have higher levels of poverty and inequality (Graham & Felton, 2006).

Having said this, for most parts of the world, there is no evidence that either rural or urban areas are associated with significant variations in

happiness (Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2009). The bulk of researchers agree on arguing that personal characteristics and level of development are the key driving forces of subjective well-being. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring everyone to be locked down at home for an unusually long time, might have widened urban–rural differences in subjective well-being, revealing the strength and the weakness of both compositional and contextual factors. For example, being locked down in small houses and without any green spaces (i.e. in large cities) might have unequally changed subjective well-being across individuals. With public spaces closed, Paris might be a worse place to be locked down than the average French town or rural residence (see Recchi et al., 2020). Finally, changes in individuals' condition (i.e. having been infected with COVID19) and behaviours (i.e. work from home; having helped others with basic needs) might be a different experience in urban vs rural regions leading to different effects on subjective well-being.

### **Urban and rural differences in subjective well-being under the COVID-19 crisis in France: compositional and contextual factors**

The outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the associated coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) originated in China in December 2019 and quickly spread across the globe causing more than 4 million deaths up to August 2021. According to Evandrou et al. (2021), the lockdown brought disruption to daily life for the whole population and measures adopted to contain the virus are likely to leave their mark by producing detrimental effects on financial, relational, physical and psychological domains. However, in some cases, the perception of both health and well-being during the COVID-19 epidemic has improved in comparison to previous years (Recchi et al., 2020). This phenomenon has been called 'the eye of the hurricane' paradox and it argues that most individuals, who have not been infected by the virus, felt happier and in better health than they would normally do (Recchi et al., 2020). This is what has been previously found after the Great East Japan Earthquake, suggesting that the general perception of well-being in life increased following the disaster. According to Uchida et al. (2014) this can be explained not only by the fact that normal factors lose their power in influencing well-being after a disaster, but also because people change their expectations of their life after a tragic event.

Indeed, feeling that one's own condition is more favourable compared with that of others may lead individuals to report higher levels of subjective well-being (Schwarz & Strack, 1999). However, although the majority of people have declared feeling healthier and having a better

feeling than before the lockdown, this trend was not equal across social classes (Recchi et al., 2020). Indeed, empirical findings showed that the pandemic has exacerbated health disparities as individuals reporting lower levels of well-being were consistently those belonging to the working class and the most financially vulnerable, people living alone and in smaller homes, those who were not born in France, and women (Recchi et al., 2020; Schradie et al., 2020). Preliminary findings on the same data set (Recchi et al., 2020) have also shown that residents in Paris experienced a significant decrease in their subjective well-being score compared to the rest of the country.

### *Data and method*

Like Recchi et al. (2020), this study used nationally representative panel data of French residents. Specifically, we have drawn seven survey waves from ELIPSS, which is a probability-based panel launched in 2012 and managed by the CDSP (Center for Socio-Political Data of Sciences Po). The sample consists of 1,404 French residents that have been initially drawn from census data. The average response rate was of about 85 per cent (Recchi et al., 2020). The first survey was administered two weeks after the start of the lockdown (April 1–8, 2020). Subsequent waves were carried out at two-week intervals: the second (April 15–22), the third (April 29–May 6), the fourth (May 23–20) and the fifth (May 27–June 4). The fourth and fifth waves came after the end of the first lockdown (on May 11) and during the period of economic reopening. The sixth wave (22–29 October) was administered during the *deconfinement* period just before the second lockdown, when the seventh wave was administered (19–26 November). Finally, a last wave was collected one year after the beginning of the pandemic (22–29 April 2021). The baseline of the current study is the ELIPSS annual survey carried out in 2019.

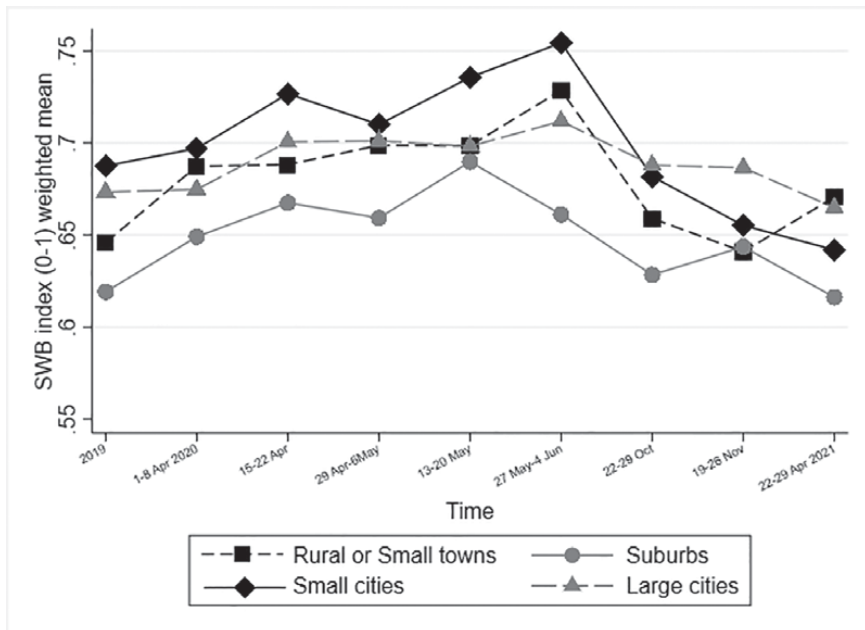
Post-stratification weights based on sex, age, education and region of residence have been computed to account for design effects and possible bias due to attrition and the acceptance rate in the enrolment phase (about 25 per cent). The collected information includes individual physical and mental health status, subjective well-being, working conditions, daily living activities and specific questions about changes due to the pandemic lockdown.

With regard to subjective well-being, we developed an index allowing us to capture subjective well-being in a holistic way (Recchi et al., 2020). More specifically, we combined respondents' responses to seven different questions regarding how often they had felt 'nervous', 'low', 'relaxed', 'sad', 'happy', 'in good health' and 'lonely' over the previous two-week period on a five-point scale from *never* to *always*. Negative feelings are inverted to

enable the construction of an additive index, which was then normalised between 0 (lowest) and 1 (highest).

The degree of urbanisation has been defined according to the French census's urban unit definition (i.e. *Tranche d'unité urbaine 2014*) which distinguishes rural and urban areas according to the number of inhabitants. More specifically, the variable has been recoded according to Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011)'s thresholds, taking value 1 for rural areas or small towns (<10,000 inhabitants), 2 for suburbs (between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants), 3 for small central cities (>50,000 and fewer than 200,000 inhabitants) and 4 for large central cities (>200,000 inhabitants).

Unadjusted descriptive statistics show the distribution of subjective well-being index over time according to the respondents' degree of urbanisation (Figure 20.1). Overall, we observe an increase of subjective well-being over the first three months of lockdown (April–June 2020), especially for



**Figure 20.1** Subjective well-being along the rural–urban continuum.

- (a) Weighted mean of subjective well-being over time and degree of urbanisation.  
 (b) Distribution of respondents living in rural or small towns, suburbs, small central cities or large central cities.  
 (c) Weighted mean of subjective well-being over time and by residence area.  
 (d) Distribution of respondents by residence area.  
 N=1,278; N=8,863 (persons-year).

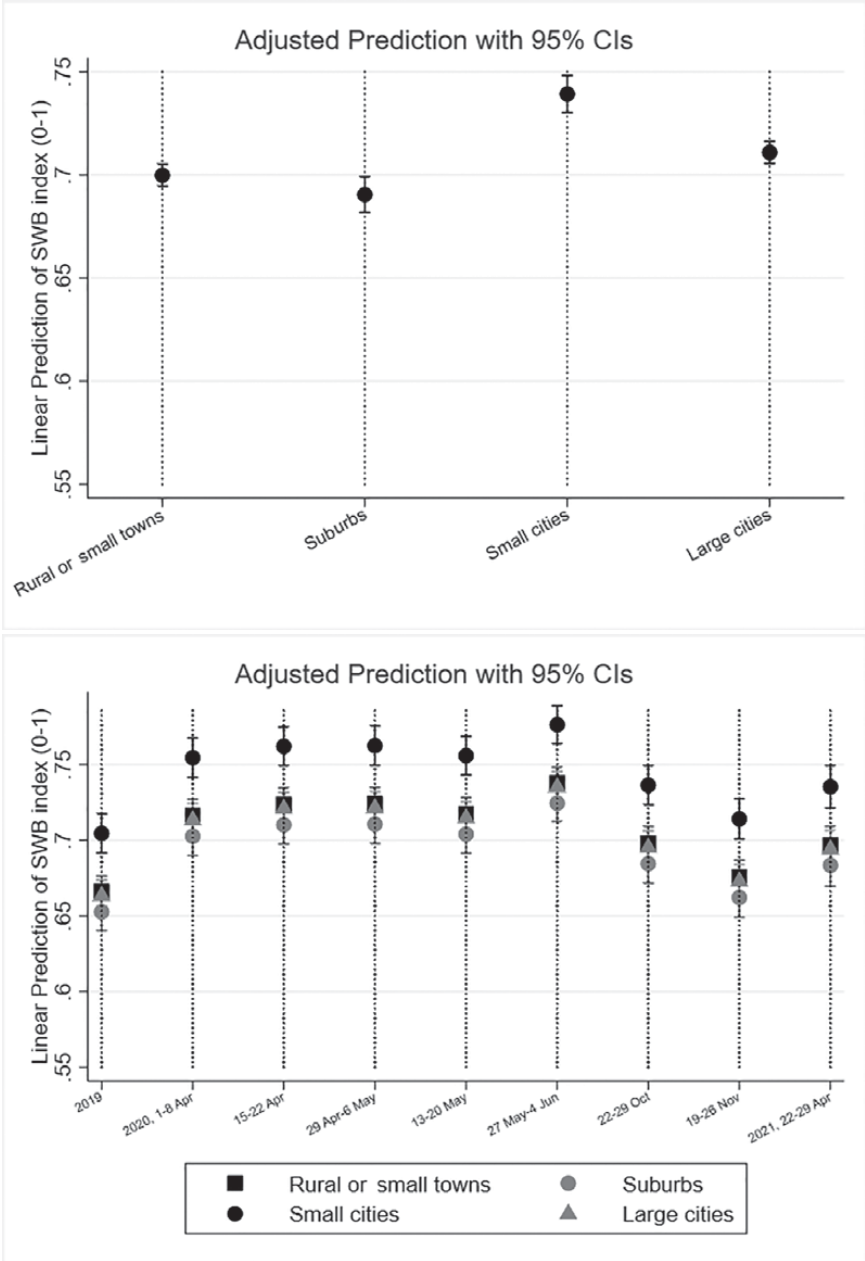
respondents living in rural areas and in small towns compared with the pre-lockdown period. The subjective well-being reported by respondents living in large central cities was almost stable over time, becoming lower compared with those reported in rural areas at the beginning of the lockdown but getting back to initial values at the end of the first lockdown (November 2020). Descriptive statistics have been confirmed by adjusted multivariate regression analyses, suggesting an increase of subjective well-being for those living in small cities (Figure 20.2).

### *Compositional factors*

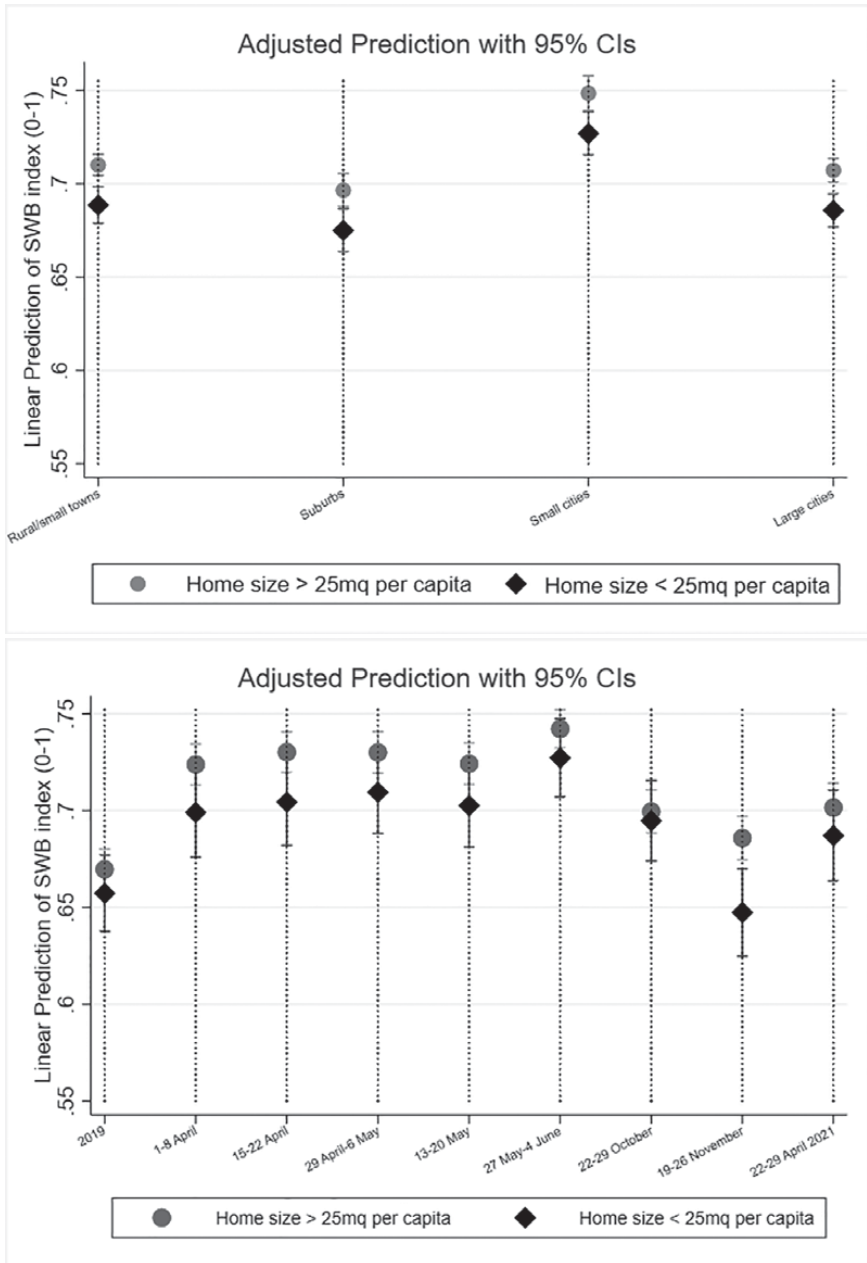
Evidence about differences in well-being across degrees of urbanisation might be explained by clustering the risk factors of individuals living in the same areas (*compositional effect*, see Stafford & McCarthy, 2005) to look at the specific characteristics of these locations. Thus, economic, social and environmental characteristics have been considered in order to dig deeper into the drivers of urban–rural differences in subjective well-being, before and during the lockdown. Namely, we used per-person house size and reliability of Internet connection as proxies for respondents' material living condition. Moreover, social relations may produce externalities potentially influencing individual well-being. Thus, although during the lockdown physical interactions significantly declined (Arpino et al., 2021), we have operationalised social capital through the individual propensity of trusting others. Residential physical environment also matters to identify whether urban–rural differences are driven by compositional factors. Thus, we included in the analysis a variable measuring whether respondents report a lack of green spaces in their neighbourhood and whether their residence space lacks public transport, making them isolated.

A stepwise OLS regression model included these variables as controls (model 1). Then, we interacted all these variables with time (model 2) to check whether these associations changed during the lockdown phases. Finally, controlling for timing, we interacted them with degrees of urbanisation/residential area (model 3). Since the dependent variable is standardised, marginal effects of each independent variable have been calculated by multiplying the coefficient by the standard deviation of the outcome variable ( $\beta * \sigma_y$ ). By including compositional factors, the difference between subjective well-being reported by residential areas has been slightly modified, suggesting that compositional factors only partially contribute to explain the rural–urban gap.

Living in a house with less than 25m<sup>2</sup> per person was associated – on average – with a decrease of about 0.003 points of subjective well-being ( $p < 0.01$ ). However, this effect was stronger in both rural areas and large cities (Figure 20.3, panel a) as well as in November 2021 – during the



**Figure 20.2** Linear prediction of subjective well-being by (a) degree of urbanisation and (b) time. We regress our subjective well-being index on an interaction with a dummy variable equal to one if the individual resides in rural, towns or urban areas during the lockdowns. The figure plots the coefficients on these interactions. We fix the 2019 level (Enquête Annuelle 2019) as the reference category. We also include the individual controls.  $N=1,278$ ;  $N=8,863$  (persons-year).



**Figure 20.3** Linear prediction of subjective well-being by compositional factors (material conditions) and time. We regress our subjective well-being index on an interaction with variables related to compositional factors during the lockdowns. The figure plots the coefficients on these interactions. We fix the 2019 level (Enquête Annuelle 2019) as the reference category. We also include the individual controls. N=1,278; N=8,863 (persons-year).

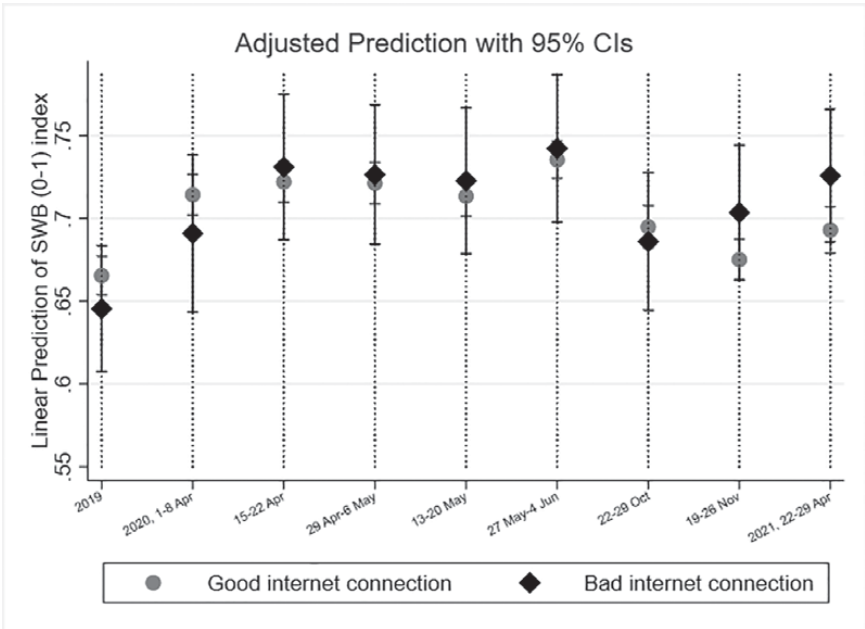
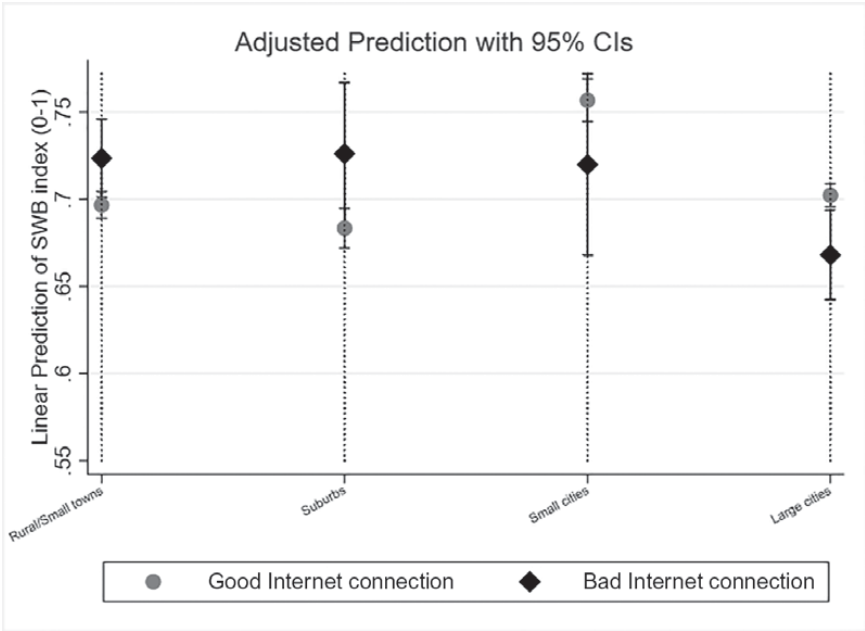


Figure 20.3 (cont.)



second lockdown – (Figure 20.3, panel b). Having a bad Internet connection was not significantly associated with subjective well-being. However, interaction terms show a negative effect among individuals living in large cities (Figure 20.3, panel c).

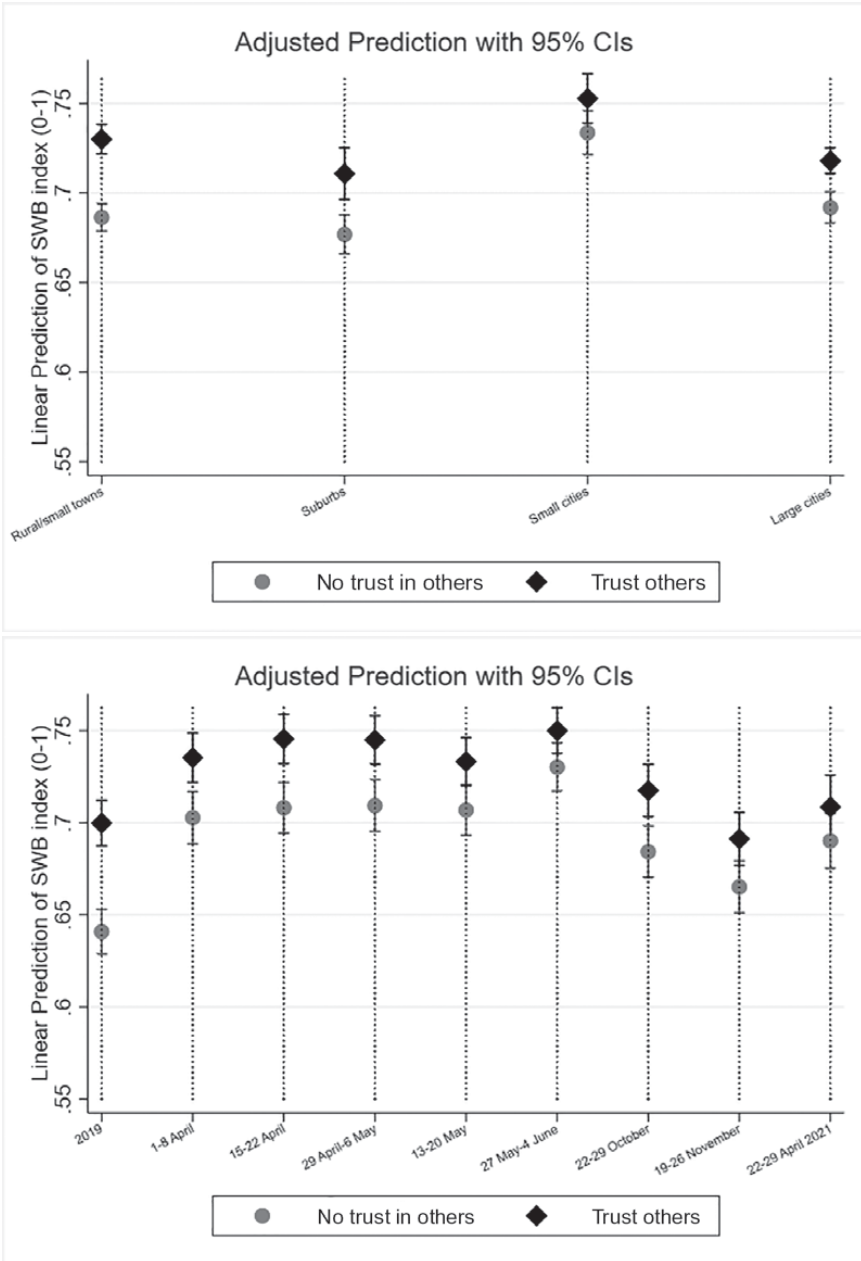
Trusting others was positively associated with well-being, although its effect on subjective well-being was smaller in small cities (Figure 20.4, panel a) and decreased over time during the lockdown (Figure 20.4, panel b). Lack of green spaces in the neighbourhood of residence was negatively associated with individual subjective well-being (p-value <0.001) and the effect is even stronger if the respondent lives in suburbs (Figure 20.5, panels a,b). The availability of transport facilities, and therefore the lack of isolation, was particularly positively associated with subjective well-being, especially among those living in cities compared with rural areas (Figure 20.5, panel c; this effect was particularly relevant during the *deconfinement* phase (October 2021) and during the second lockdown when people returned to the workplace and schools were opened (Figure 20.5, panel d).

### *Contextual factors*

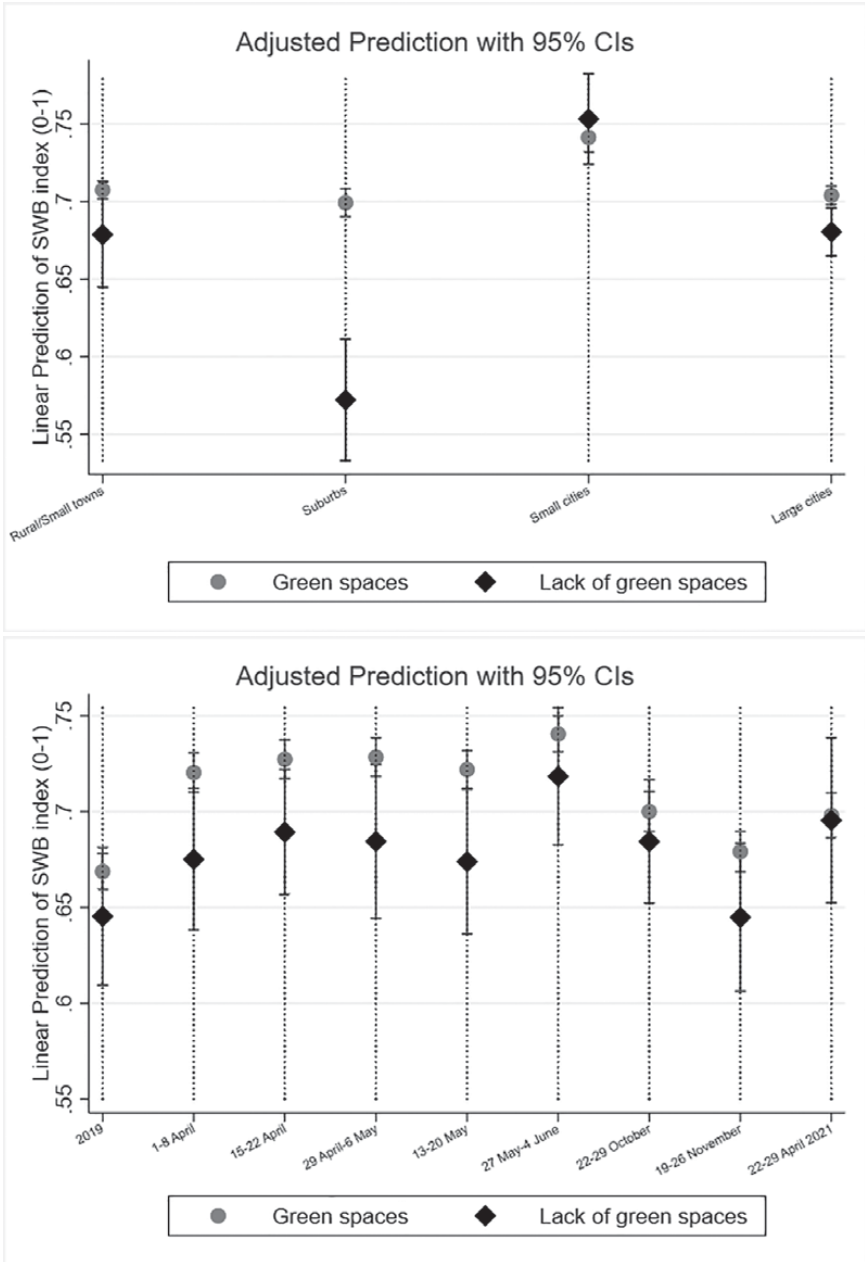
Since most of the variation in subjective well-being is often attributable to individual characteristics (Bellas & Tranmer, 2012), we adopted an individual fixed effects approach which, by controlling for unobserved individual time-invariant features, ensures that our estimates are not suffering from selection bias as variables that vary between individuals but not within persons are excluded from the model.

Figure 20.6 shows the linear prediction of subjective well-being by points in time, controlling for individual fixed effects. As already shown by Recchi et al. (2020), individuals' subjective well-being significantly increased in 2020 compared with that reported in 2019. However, it came back to pre-pandemic values over the course of the lockdown. More specifically, we observe that subjective well-being scores have risen since the quarantine started (1–8 April 2020). The rise is slight but constant over the first two months of lockdown, with a peak at the beginning of June. Then it decreased, and by November 2020 it was almost back to the pre-lockdown values, but it increased again at the beginning of the second lockdown (April 2021).

Changes of individuals' subjective well-being over the course of the pandemic might be significantly different according to whether respondents have been infected with COVID-19, changed working conditions, or helped neighbours (i.e. contextual factors). Estimates have been performed, stratifying by degree of urbanisation. Namely, we notice that the increase of subjective well-being over the lockdown period was mostly reported if respondents have not been directly affected by the virus, especially if they live in suburbs and cities (Figure 20.7). Teleworking partially moderated



**Figure 20.4** Linear prediction of subjective well-being by compositional factors and degree of urbanisation/residence region. We regress our subjective well-being index on an interaction with variables related to compositional factors for degree of urbanisation/residence region. The figure plots the coefficients on these interactions. We also include the individual controls. N=1,278; N=8,863 (persons-year).



**Figure 20.5** Subjective well-being by lockdown phase. We regress our subjective well-being index on survey wave by controlling for individual fixed effects. We fix the 2019 level (Enquête Annuelle 2019) as the reference category. N=1,278; N=8,863 (persons-year).

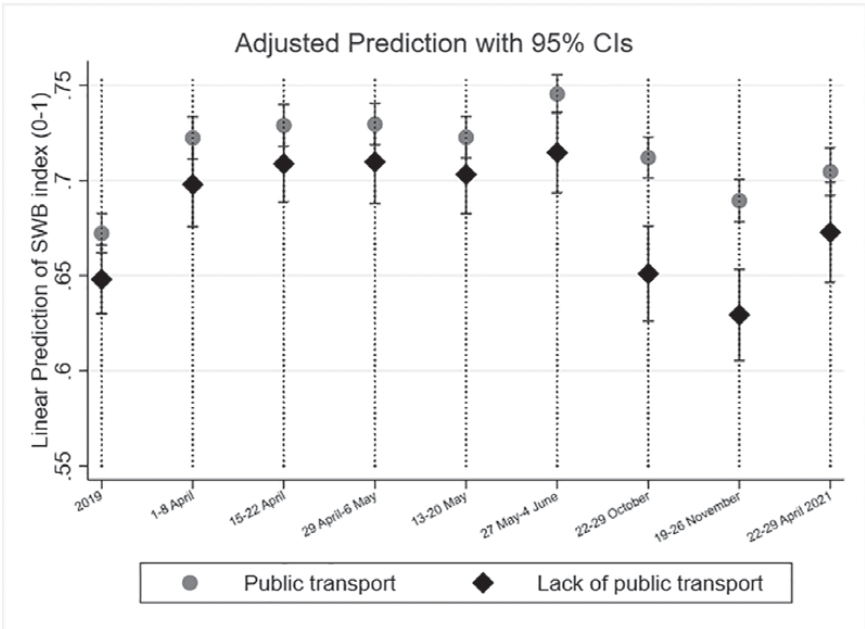
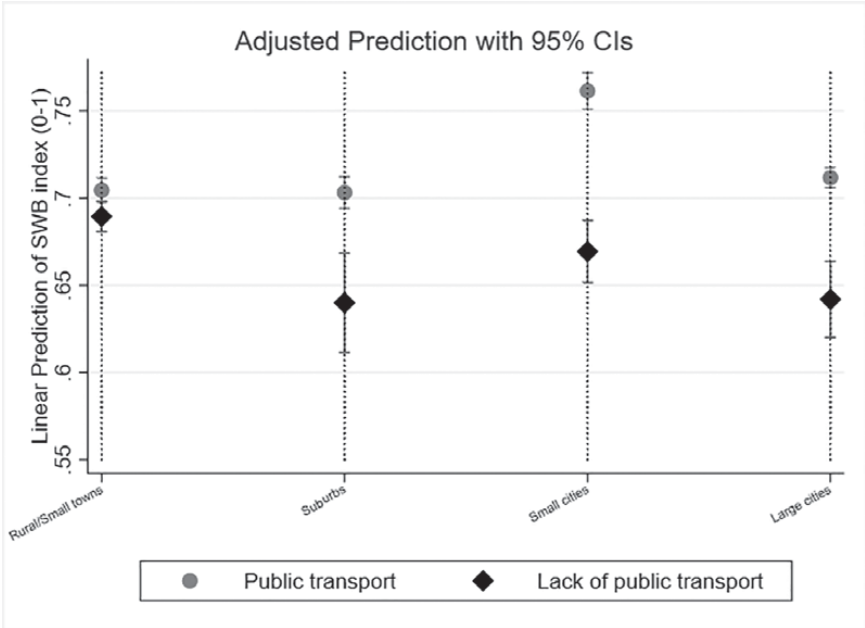
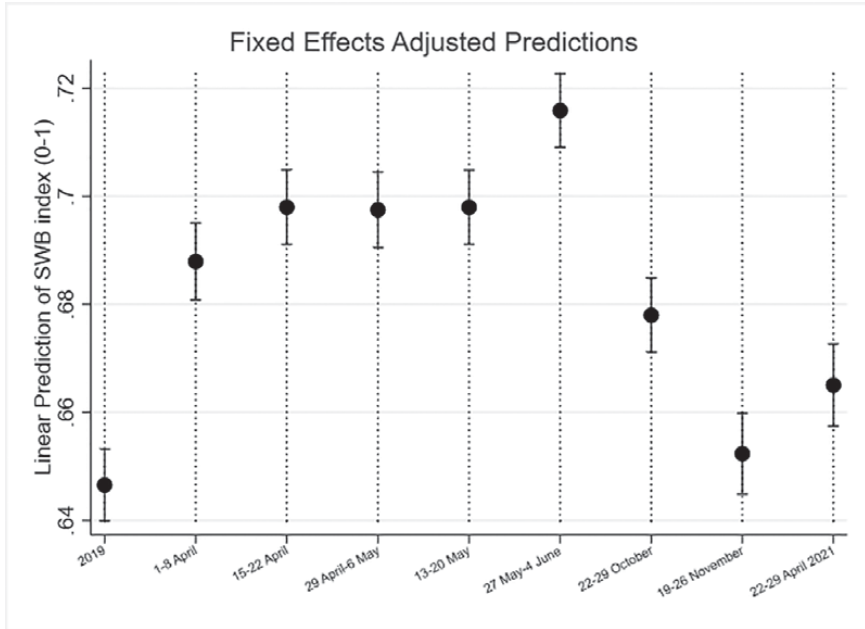


Figure 20.5 (cont.)



**Figure 20.6** Subjective well-being by lockdown phase and COVID-19 infection. We regress our subjective well-being index on survey wave, having had COVID-19, having kin who had COVID-19 and by controlling for individual fixed effects. We fix the 2019 level (Enquête Annuelle 2019) as the reference category.  $N=1,278$ ;  $N=8,863$  (persons-year).

this relationship by increasing well-being during the first phase of the lockdown, but only among respondents living in suburbs (Figure 20.8). Finally, respondents living in large cities who have helped neighbours during the first period of lockdown reported significantly higher scores of subjective well-being (Figure 20.9).

## Conclusions

This study aims to explore whether the COVID-19 pandemic, by requiring everyone to be locked down at home for a long time, has widened urban-rural differences in subjective well-being. Results have highlighted meaningful differences of subjective well-being across residence regions and population density by suggesting that being locked down in small cities was a less stressful experience than in other residential contexts such as large cities and suburbs.

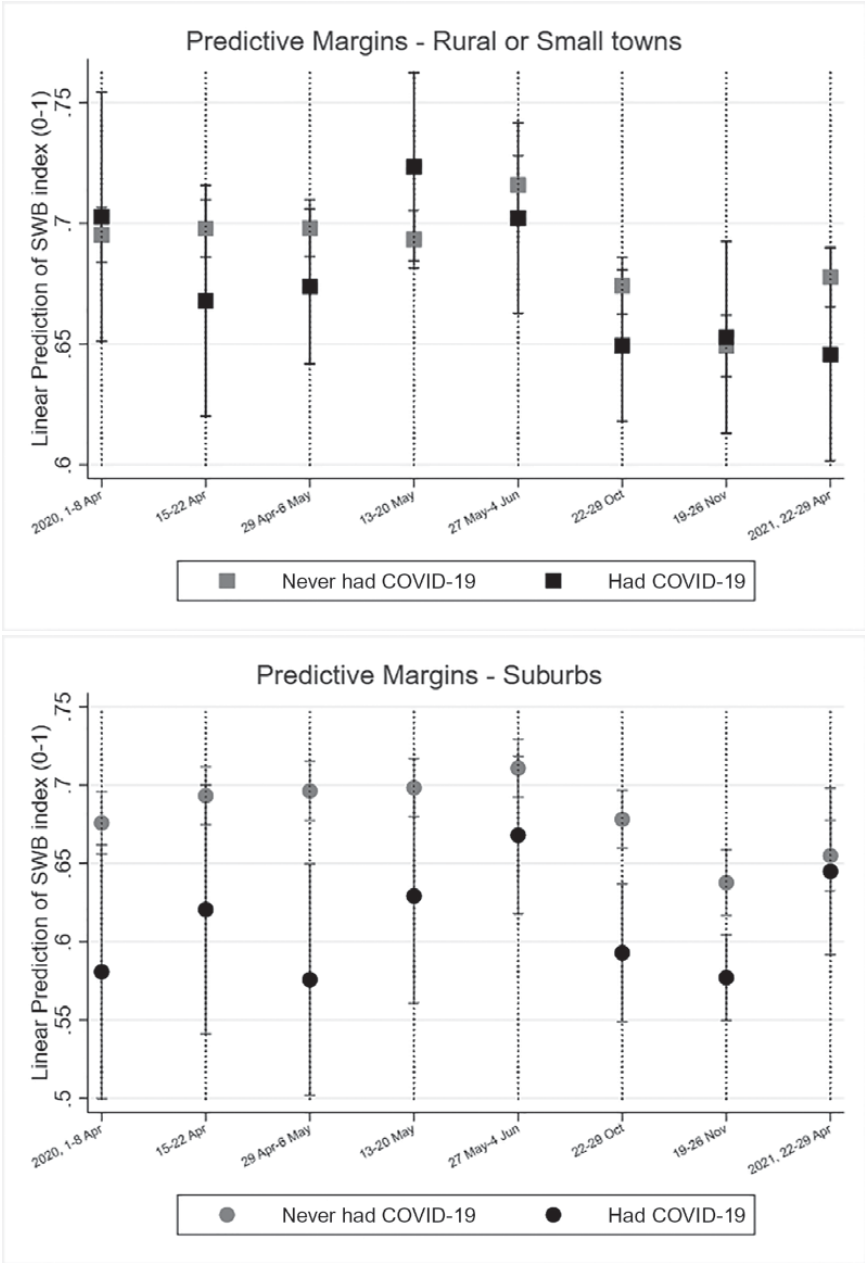


Figure 20.7 Subjective well-being by lockdown phase over COVID infection by degree of urbanisation. N=1,278; N=8,863 (persons-year).

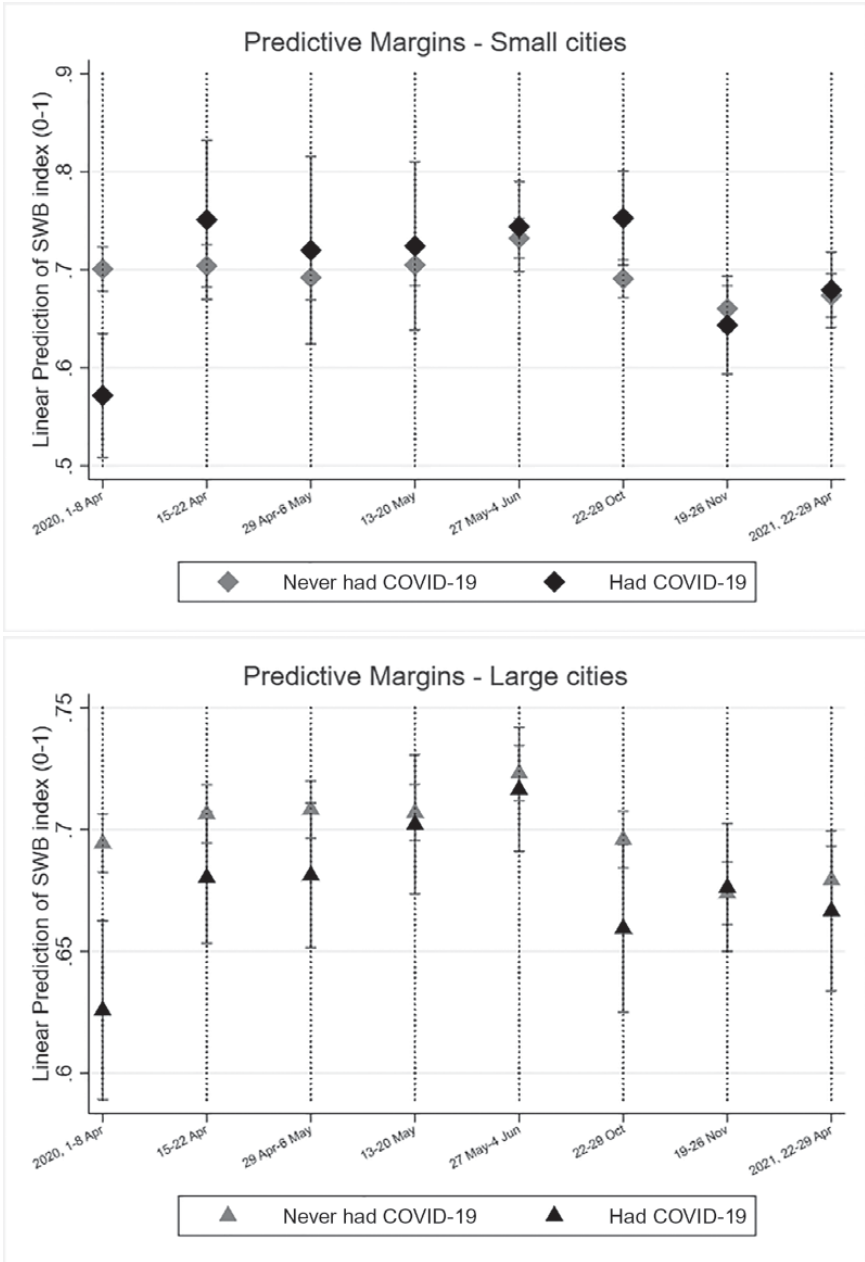
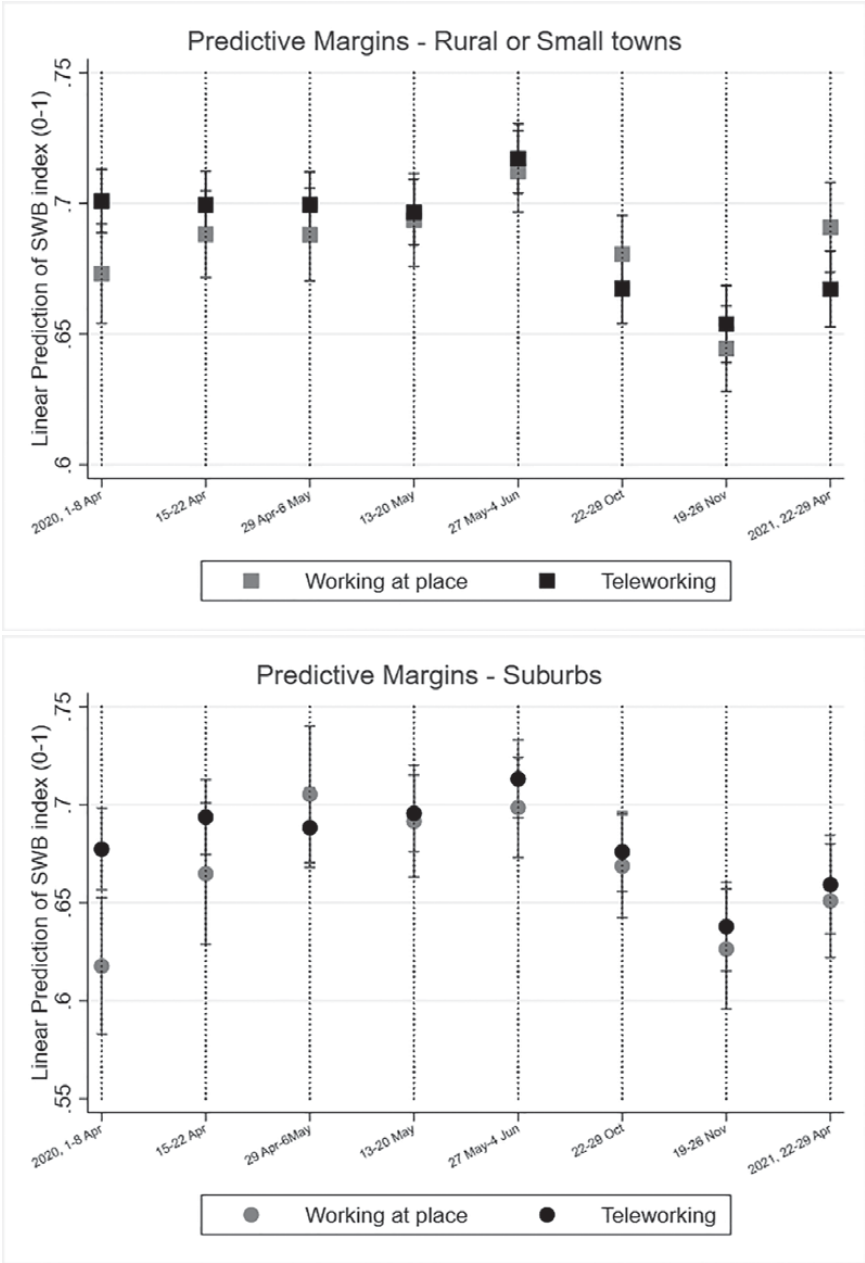


Figure 20.7 (cont.)



**Figure 20.8** Subjective well-being by lockdown phase over changes in working condition by degree of urbanisation. N=1,278; N=8,863 (persons-year).



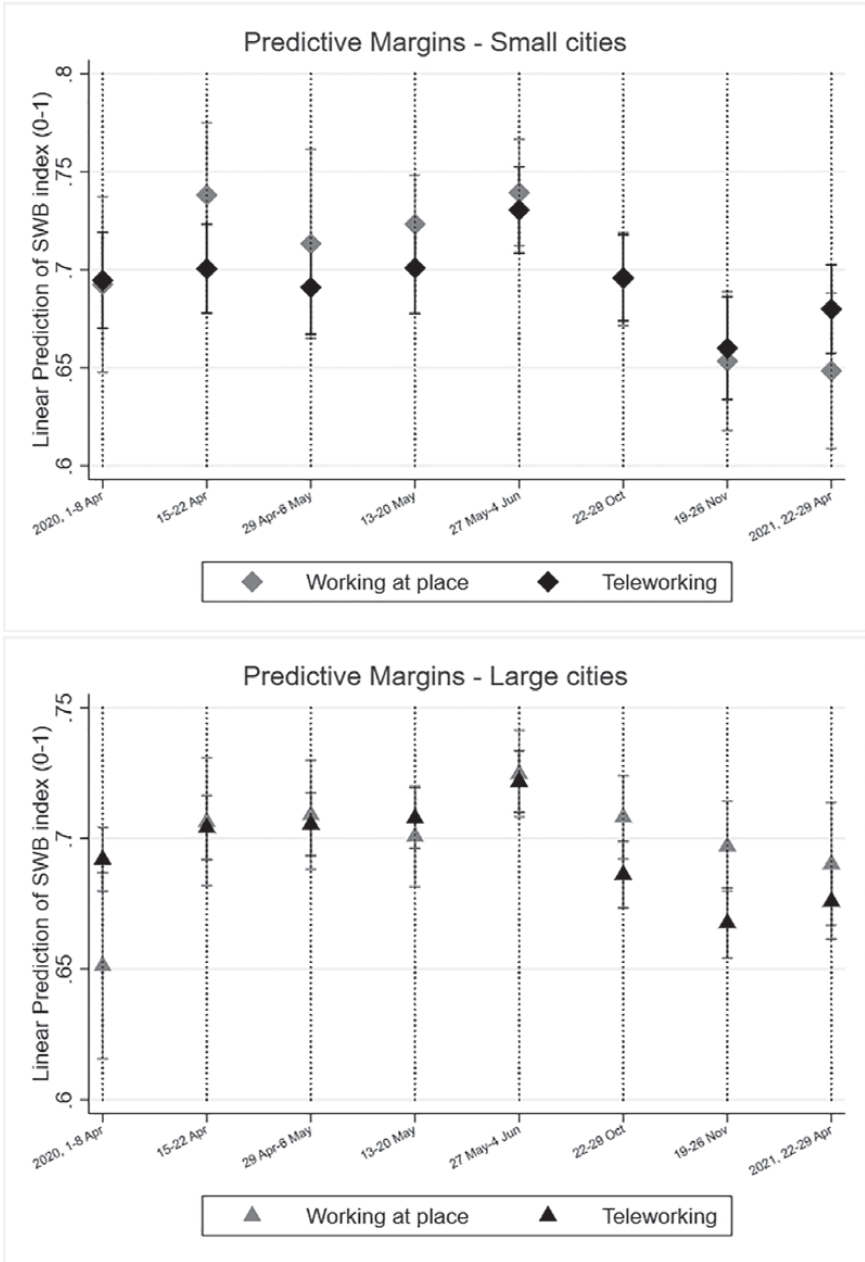
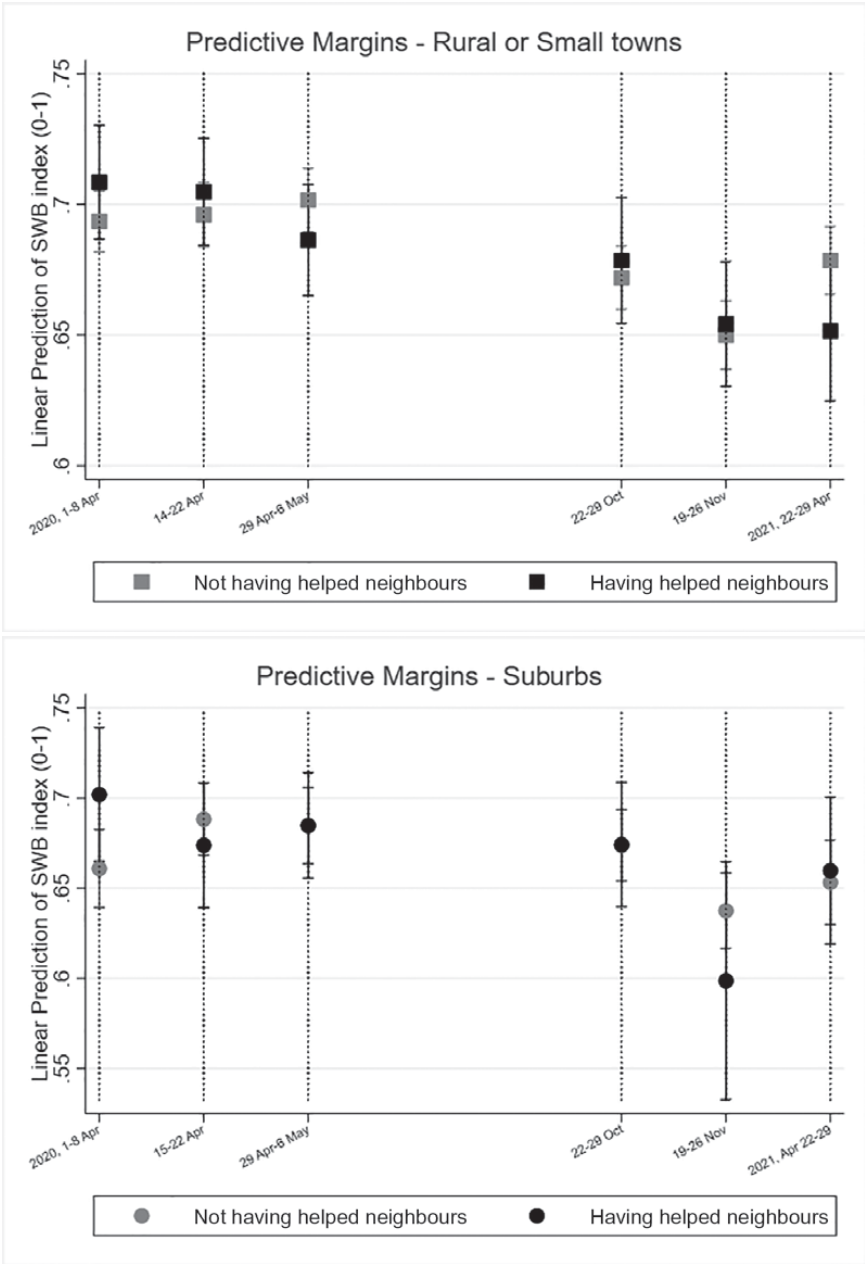


Figure 20.8 (cont.)



**Figure 20.9** Subjective well-being by lockdown phase over help offered to neighbours by degree of urbanisation. N=1,278; N=8,863 (persons-year).

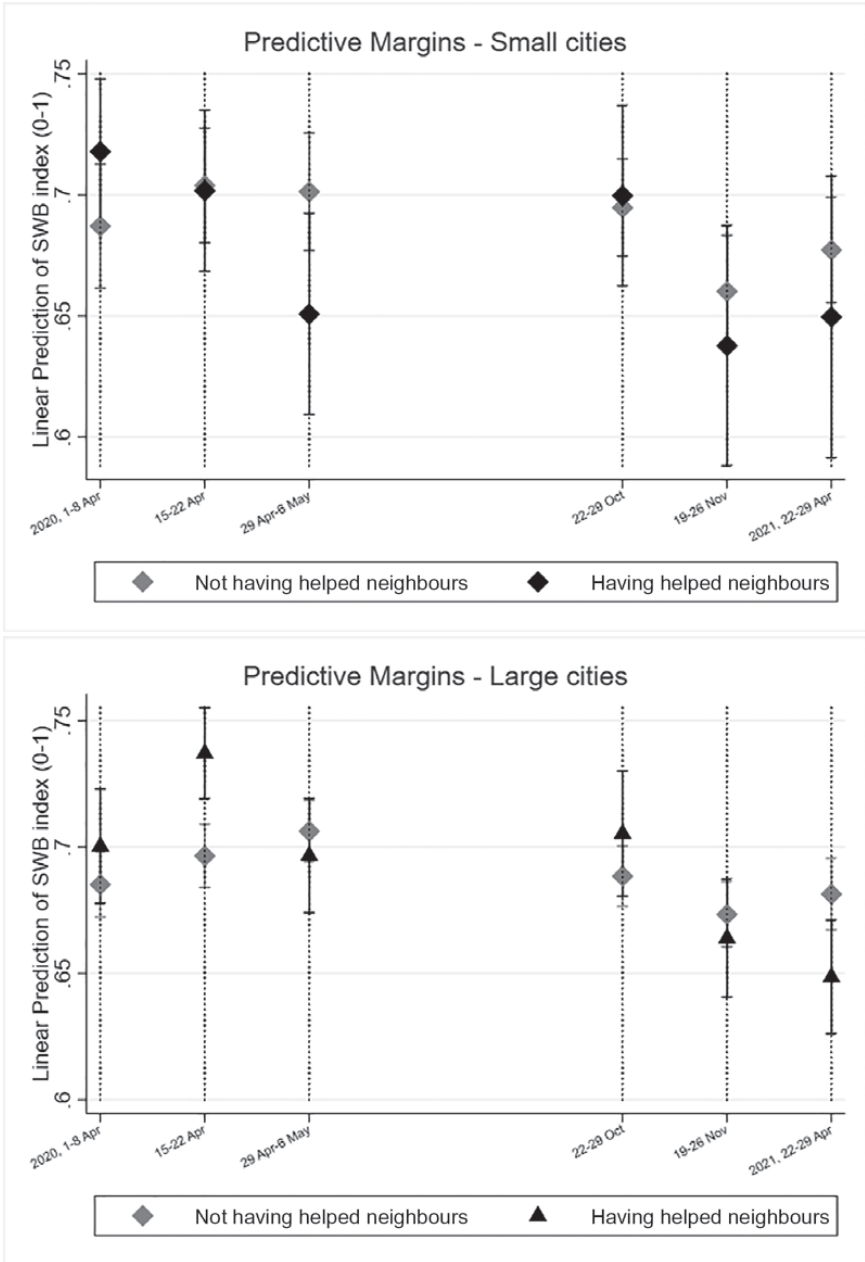


Figure 20.9 (cont.)

Our empirical findings show that pre-existing material conditions, social capital and physical environment only partially contributed to explain the differences in subjective well-being across residential areas. Per-person house dimensions, the availability of green spaces, having a good Internet connection, lack of isolation, and trust in others were specifically relevant for well-being of those living in large cities but do not fully explain why small cities were better off. Similarly, controlling for individual fixed effects, contextual changes only partially contributed to explain changes in subjective well-being across different residential areas. These findings are not only consistent with existing literature (i.e. Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2017), arguing that although small cities show greater levels of well-being regardless of specific compositional and contextual factors, they also indicate that small cities have reacted better to the pandemic than other locations.

However, our findings also show that respondents living in suburbs and in large cities were those reporting the lowest levels of well-being. Indeed, although the city offers more attractive job opportunities and more social and cultural outlets for young people (i.e. restaurants, clubs, museums, theatres and so on), according to Wirth's theory (1938), it is also characterised by anomie and alienation. During the pandemic, the availability of spaces (in- and outdoor) and the possibility to be (albeit virtually) connected to others assumed a greater importance to preserve mental health (Corley et al., 2021; Arpino et al., 2021).

This study contributes to the existing literature in many ways. First, it used original panel data able to follow individuals over one full year of the pandemic (April 2020–April 2021). Second, it used a holistic index to assess subjective well-being, able to capture in a more comprehensive way individuals' feelings. Finally, by using a four-point ordinal scale to measure the urban–rural gradient, we provided original evidence on both compositional and contextual factors influencing the difference of quality of life in urban and rural areas over the pandemic.

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## Using a new method to map quality of life: The case of Denmark

*Rolf Lyneborg Lund*

### Introduction

While neighbourhood studies are on a rise, almost none of the research done on neighbourhood studies considers the main characteristic of the research, the neighbourhood. The change in the rural/urban demographic composition is continually accelerating at different speeds, and the number of neighbourhood studies within the social sciences has increased. Since the early Chicago School (Park & Burgess, 1925), social scientists have been interested in the local dynamics of people and have asked questions revolving around a simple thesis: the local setting, be it social or structural, has an impact on the individuals living there. The studies that fall within this thesis range from the very tangible and directly measurable physical concepts such as pollution (Diekmann & Meyer, 2010; Huppé et al., 2013; Jayaraman & Nidhi, 2008), housing quality (DeSilva et al., 2012; Doocy et al., 2007; Filandri & Olagnero, 2014; Hwang, 2015; Lu & Song, 2006; Peng et al., 2009; Sampson, 2008) and health (Johnson et al., 2017; Krieger, Waterman, et al., 2017; Newbold et al., 2013; Yoon et al., 2015) to other studies more centred around the deprivation thesis. The latter studies often focus on the composition of the local neighbourhood such as overall income levels, unemployment rates, crime rates or similar characteristics (Galster, 2010; Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Gieryn, 2002; Johnson et al., 2017; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Lund, 2019, 2020; Potter et al., 2012; Sampson, 2012). Overall, these studies focus on neighbourhood and are all informed by information either inherent in, or social phenomena that occur around, the neighbourhood.

Quality of life often fits in either of these categories but is often overlooked. There are two overall reasons for the lack of studies within this field. The first revolves around the information needed to measure quality of life. While medical journals often reduce 'quality of life' to a physical aspect, social scientists are more interested in the perceived quality of life in the sense of happiness, satisfaction or joy (Lolle & Andersen, 2016). These questions

are hard to gather by proxy. Even if we have no information about income, we can use house price as a proxy, but we have no way of knowing how a person feels solely from proxies. This requires the researcher to ask either through a qualitative interview or operationalised through a survey, and survey data on especially smaller, geographically enclosed entities are less common than administratively gathered data. The second reason is based on *how* we measure quality of life. To what extent is an individual able to discern 'subjective quality of life' when asked about it and to what extent is this transferable over geographical distances? This is, to some extent, the first question of this chapter: 'How does subjective quality of life differ in Denmark?' and this leads to a more focused question: 'How is subjective quality of life perceived differently between varying degrees of rurality?'

By utilising a new methodology to capture data at neighbourhood level, and by using computational methods of geographical clustering described later in this chapter, it is possible to disentangle not only rural as an overall category but to capture different types of rurality and compare this to different types of urbanity. Is quality of life the same in deprived neighbourhoods in rural settings as it is in deprived neighbourhoods in urban settings? This chapter will attempt to answer this question while illuminating how place of living affects our perceived quality of life.

### Neighbourhoods and quality of life

Most of us have a clear understanding of what a neighbourhood is because we, with a few exceptions, live in one. We can mentally conceptualise that we live in a municipality that contains a city or town that again contains sections of that city/town that again contains our local neighbourhood that can be reduced all the way down to our dwelling. The problem often arises when we must describe the above entities. We have a common way of expressing our municipality and city since they have official, administrative names. We can easily distinguish between these, and no matter with whom we talk, we can point to a map where that name exists. If the city is large enough, we even have administrative names for subdivisions. The same can be said for the street we live on and the dwelling we reside in; it has a name and number. However, we have no common recognition for the neighbourhood – it might have a name but often these names are either very local or vary to a degree that only residents within the neighbourhood can recognise, and often the neighbourhood is an unnamed entity that even varies in size and location if multiple individuals are asked to define it.

Neighbourhood matters. Not only in tangible ways such as housing quality and access to goods but in the sense that the local cohesion directly and measurably impacts both everyday life and life course events (Jørgensen

et al., 2016, 2021; Lund, 2020). In short, quality of life differs over distance (Dissart & Deller, 2000). Not only do we know that bigger cities in Europe are some of the most segregated when it comes to income, educational attainment and labour market affiliation (European Commission, 2017), the same can be found in almost all cities in Denmark (Lund, 2019). The problem is that this intracity segregation is hard to measure – as noted, most data is collected at administrative levels and thus research is often restricted to using whatever geography is available at the smallest level.

With the lack of an overall administrative approach to neighbourhoods, research into smaller neighbourhoods is often based on administrative definitions such as parishes, cities or census tracts (Bellavance et al., 2007; Lund, 2019; Ruggles, 2014; Sampson & Sharkey, 2008). In most cases, this results in the same problem it was meant to solve – administrative areas are, even at a smaller level, unsatisfactory containers for social life. There are studies that focus on an even smaller local neighbourhood level of aggregation (Bower et al., 2014; Jones & Pebley, 2014; Logan et al., 2011; Malmberg et al., 2011; Wodtke et al., 2011) and the argument for a very small aggregation level is to isolate whatever research aim one has to exclude as much ‘noise’ as possible. Where some studies use smaller administrative areas such as census tracts consisting of either block-level or street-level data as in some American studies (Bower et al., 2014; Gage et al., 1986; Krieger, Feldman et al., 2017) or smaller statistical units of measurement as the Small Areas for Market Statistics (SAMS) used in Sweden (Lagerlund et al., 2015; Merlo et al., 2013), others use more inductive clustering techniques such as k-means clustering or Bayesian methods (Ferreira et al., 2011; Johnelle Sparks et al., 2013; Malmberg et al., 2011; Östh et al., 2015; Petrović et al., 2017). Where studies that utilise smaller sets of administrative data are more precise in isolating the local area, they still fail to account for the actual distribution inside the neighbourhoods and do not account for homogeneity. Lack of homogeneity is normally not considered a problem if the unit of measurement is expected to be heterogeneous, but since especially neighbourhood-level statistics are known to cluster in socio-economic homogeneous groups based on housing price and overall market value, we expect that the clusters are homogeneous based on parameters like income. This is also the reason why so much neighbourhood research is directly concerned with effects from within a neighbourhood – the inhabitants are thought of as a group that can affect each other because of their somewhat shared background. In the end, it is impossible to know if the lower internal heterogeneity is a result of simple data smoothing<sup>1</sup> or because the administrative areas capture the local better.

1 As seen in Lund, 2018.



These discussions are important when considering neighbourhood-level data and especially the effects thereof. This chapter will investigate how the introduction of small-scale neighbourhood-level statistics affects the perceived quality of life at different degrees of urbanism (Lund, 2018).

## Methodology and data

Data for this chapter was obtained from three different sources: (1) geographical grid data from the Danish Geodata Agency, (2) data describing area-level as well as individual-level socio-economic traits from Statistics Denmark and (3) the survey 'Quality of Life in Denmark' as described in [Chapter 1](#).

*Geographical grid data.* The georeferenced data consists of the national square grid that divides Denmark into vectors of 100m × 100m cells and topographical maps that contain information about buildings, roads, rivers, railroads etc. The georeferenced data is linked to the registers, but since Statistics Denmark has very strict discretion criteria for anonymity, the data must be clustered to at least 100 inhabitants per measurable geographical unit before further linking to individual-level data

*SES data.* Data on socio-economic status on both individual and area level was obtained from Statistics Denmark for the year 2015 to match with the survey data. Data used to characterise SES on both an individual level and area level consists of information about educational attainment (total months of full-time education), labour force affiliation (percentage of year unemployed), income (measured as spendable income), debt (total), private ownership of property (assets in housing with debt deducted) and job status in ISCED format (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 2010). Area-level data was aggregated to capture overall area characteristics while retaining the individual-level data as well. Three other variables (gender, age and ethnicity) were included to control for confounding effects.

*Survey data.* The survey data was collected between 2015 and 2016 by Statistics Denmark where they surveyed the whole of Denmark but with a focus on thirty-eight specific municipalities; this will be evident when looking at neighbourhood-level data later. N is 42,500, where around 2,500 have no identifiable geographical information and 8,000 more have missing information in regard to some of the socio-economic measurements used to create the composite items described later. Thus, total N for the descriptive analysis is 40,000, while the regression analysis is restricted to 32,642 respondents. For a thorough description of the data, please refer to [Chapter 18](#) (Lolle).

### *Spatial modelling*

To capture the local neighbourhood effect, this study involved an automated redistricting based on an inductive, recursive algorithm to isolate smaller,

socio-economic clusters (Lund, 2018). While it is methodologically challenging to measure the ways individuals create and maintain social communities, the ways landscapes seem to facilitate this is not (Entwisle et al., 1997; Feld, 1981; Lund, 2018, 2019; White et al., 2005). The shaping of cities, communities and housing follows principles of closeness and these entities are separated by way of physical barriers such as roads, railways, rivers, lakes, forests or other objects that may not have been intended as separators but often act as ones (Feld, 1981; Lund, 2018). Using this logic, micro-areas were established by examining the way individuals cluster in an already existing geography. The methodology involved two distinct steps: first, a definition of rules for overall geographical subdivision and measures to secure that a minimum number of inhabitants is located in each geographical entity; second, clustering based on strict discretion criteria. As mentioned, using Danish register data involves very specific discretion rules when it comes to geographical clustering and requires at least 100 inhabitants per geographical unit before an actual merge between geography and individual data can be performed.

This requires further steps that are optimised to secure four separate criteria: (1) having at least 100 inhabitants per area, (2) merge areas so that as few merges as possible take place, (3) merge areas so that the areas are as geographically small as possible and (4) merge so that merges as close to the 100 rule is possible. These criteria were made to secure areas that are small in terms of geographical area as well as inhabitant-wise. The overall advantage of this optimisation is that merge solutions can be evaluated objectively, and the most optimal version can be selected.

While this methodology is applicable to most data that can be linked to geography, it has been designed to work with large-scale register data. Thus, the issue of the methodology in this setting is the somewhat fragile smaller areas when using non-population-based surveys. As described later, this still captures overall neighbourhood effects because homogeneity of the overall neighbourhood population is captured from register data, but it lacks the same when looking solely at survey data. Nonetheless, capturing neighbourhood effects by looking at actual neighbourhoods compared to administrative borders is by far an advantageous approach, as shown in this chapter.

Furthermore, these neighbourhoods are also linked to municipality-level data as well as the four-way classification of municipalities created by the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fishery to describe the level of urbanism of each municipality (Ministeriet for Fødevarer Landbrug og Fiskeri, 2011). Each municipality is classified based on the items seen in [Table 21.1](#).

These indicators are then added to create the rurality index and municipalities are classified as either outer, rural, semi-urban or urban municipalities. In Denmark, there are currently sixteen municipalities classified as outer,

**Table 21.1** Classification of municipality type.

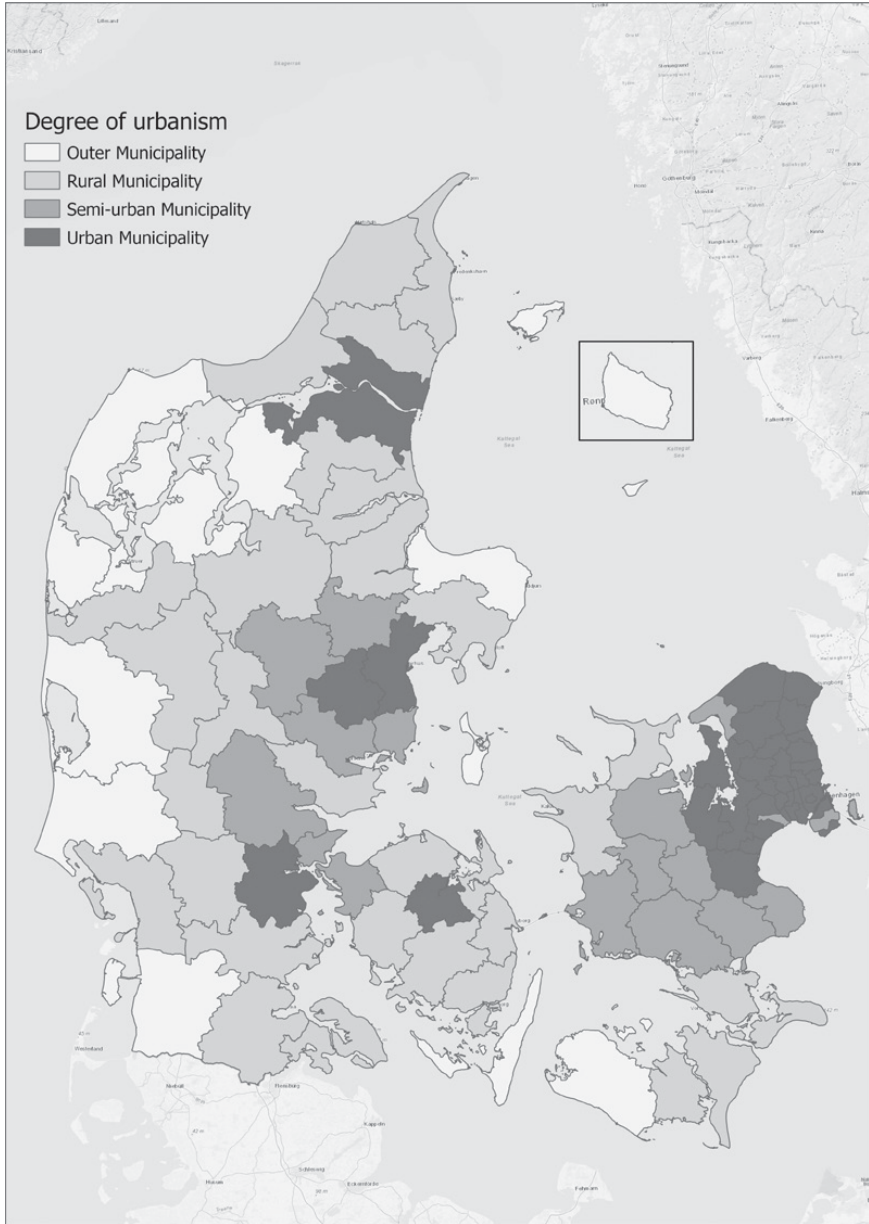
Urbanisation	Number of inhabitants
	% of inhabitants in cities within the municipality with >1,000 inhabitants
	Percentage of area used for agriculture
Centre/periphery	Average distance to nearest highway
	% of job positions compared to % employed
	Average point distance to an area within the municipality with a large surplus of job vacancies
Importance of agriculture	% employed in agriculture
Demographic trends	Trend of employment in a 10-year period
	Trend of population growth in a 10-year period
Demography	% of population between the age of 17 and 64
	% of population between the age of 25 and 44
Education	% of inhabitants with only primary-level education
	% with at least bachelor-level education attainment
Economy	Per capita tax base

thirty as rural, seventeen as semi-urban and thirty-five as urban as seen in [Figure 21.1](#).

While there are some criteria in the list that are bound by economic tendencies that are also captured within the deprivation index described below, the main objective of the four categories is to define municipalities in regard to their geographical setting and their overall proximity to either larger cities or to agriculture. Thus, rurality is mainly a question about distance and function and not directly related to socio-economics.

### *Scale construction*

The items used to measure quality of life are based on three overall concepts: subjective life satisfaction (satisfaction 1), personal feelings about life (unhappiness) and composite life satisfaction (satisfaction 2). Subjective life satisfaction is a single item where respondents were asked: ‘All in all, how satisfied are you with your life these days?’ The respondent can choose values between 0 (very dissatisfied) and 10 (very satisfied), which is the case for all following items described in this section. This captures a very



**Figure 21.1** Municipality classifications of Denmark.

subjective but also very clear indicator for life satisfaction, but might lack the specific elements of life satisfaction – to what extent does each life component add to the value chosen? To capture different elements of life satisfaction, a composite measurement is created using the questions: ‘How satisfied are you with your family life?’, ‘How satisfied are you with your social relations?’ and ‘How satisfied are you with your daily life?’ The composite scale is created as a standardised measurement ranging from 0 to 10 ( $\alpha=0.78$ ), and even though there is a high level of correlation between the single item in subjective life satisfaction and the composite measurement (.70) there is still a 30 per cent variance that captures different elements of life satisfaction. Personal feelings about life consist of three different items: ‘To what extent did you feel happy yesterday?’, ‘To what extent did you feel worried yesterday?’ and ‘To what extent did you feel sad yesterday?’ As with the other composite measurement, the scale has been standardised ranging from 0 to 10 ( $\alpha=0.79$ ). This composite, in contrast to the other two, has a stronger focus on negative feelings and thus will capture the dynamic of overall life satisfaction compared to the possible negative feelings the respondent might also experience from day to day.

When measuring neighbourhood deprivation, only register data information is used and thus it becomes possible to capture the full dynamic of the neighbourhood without being restricted to survey information. As a result, neighbourhood-level deprivation is calculated on the whole population in 2015 and 2016 (averaged),  $N=5,615,365$ . Three overall measurements were used: median neighbourhood income, percentage of neighbourhood inhabitants with only a primary level education, and yearly unemployment rate measured in days. The index has been normalised ranging from 0 (lowest level of deprivation) to 1 (highest level of deprivation). Furthermore, the neighbourhoods have been classified in deciles with the 1st decile being the least deprived and the 10th being the most.

Overall, quality of life can comprise a wide variety of items, and survey data in combination with register data is one way of approaching this subject. The focus of this chapter will be on mapping and understanding the spatial elements of the theme, and thus quality of life in this chapter is reduced to two different measurements of perceived quality of life and one measurement for capturing the negative aspects of life.

### **Quality of life in Denmark**

Subjective quality of life in Denmark is overall very homogeneous. There are instances with low level of subjective quality of life, but these are mostly at an individual level. Furthermore, the average life satisfaction score is above 7,

almost no matter the aggregation level of the data. Nonetheless, there are variances and, in some cases, relatively large variances between adjacent neighbourhoods. Looking at quality of life in Denmark, it is as varied as can be.

Looking at [Figure 21.2](#), we see how the survey sampling only captured parts of Denmark and in some areas focused only on the larger cities. Only areas with more than ten survey respondents are shown due to discretion, and maps shown only include the average of the single-item quality of life question as described above. While South Denmark, parts of North Denmark, Fyn and the Capital area are all very well sampled, large parts of Middle Jutland, Northern Jutland and Eastern Zealand are only sampled in the main cities.

While this only covers some parts of Denmark, there is an even distribution between rural/urban settings and thus the range of the data is still representative within the overall framework when comparing degree of urbanism to different levels of quality of life. Comparing the municipality maps ([Figure 21.3](#)) with neighbourhood-level data ([Figure 21.2](#)), many of the internal differences in subjective quality of life are masked at municipality level, where bluer colours indicate lower levels of life satisfaction and brighter purple colours indicate higher levels. Looking at the close-up of, for example, Copenhagen (upper right picture, [Figure 21.3](#)), we see that major differences are located within just a single municipality of Copenhagen having adjacent neighbourhoods with around a 10 per cent difference in life satisfaction measured as neighbourhood averages on the life satisfaction scale. This is also true of the three other largest cities in Denmark. The full spectrum of variance is present within a single municipality and between neighbourhood-level data, which implies that life satisfaction is highly local.

[Table 21.2](#) presents the three measurements of quality of life on municipality level and categorised within the four overall categories used to classify the level of urbanism in Denmark, as described earlier. Looking at the two categories of satisfaction, both indicate a generally high level of life satisfaction with only small differences between the two measurements, while a small trend is visible when comparing the different degrees of urbanism.

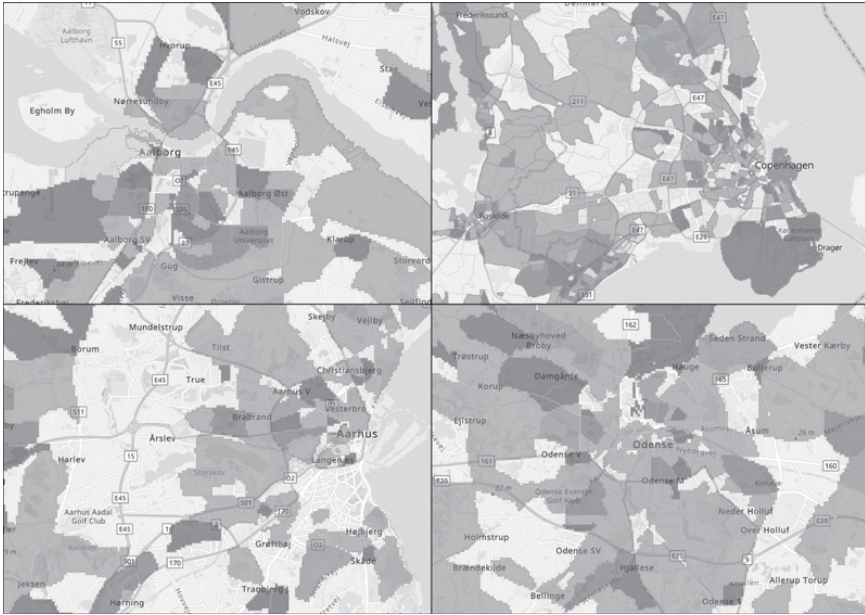
Where the single-item satisfaction measurement decreases by .14 from outskirts to urban environments, the composite decreases by .22. This is only a very small change percentage-wise, with no more than a 2.2 per cent decrease in satisfaction. The same can be said about composite unhappiness, where the change is 3.2 per cent. While this is considerably less than the variation seen with neighbourhood-level satisfaction (see [Figures 21.2](#) and [21.3](#)), there are still small trends to imply less satisfaction in urban environments.

In [Table 21.3](#), neighbourhoods are instead divided into degree of deprivation split in deciles, where the 1st decile is the least deprived and the 10th









**Figure 21.3** Neighbourhood distribution of life satisfaction in the four largest cities.

is the most. As noted earlier, Danes are, in general, very happy about their everyday lives but there is still variation within overall degrees of deprivation and life satisfaction. The change in the single item of composite satisfaction is 2.5 per cent and 2 per cent between the most and least deprived neighbourhoods, while the composite scale for unhappiness varies a little less than 3 per cent.

While this is almost the same change found in [Table 21.2](#), it implies that the change is bound to the levels of urbanism as well as levels of deprivation. This suggests that there might be a correlation between deprivation and urbanism. [Table 21.4](#) is divided into both degree of urbanism and level of deprivation to compare the effects of deprivation in different geographical settings.

Combining degree of deprivation with degree of urbanism has captured most of the effect seen between the neighbourhoods with most and least amount of life satisfaction, where the most satisfied are located in the richer, outskirts areas while the least satisfied are in poorer, urban areas. This, however, adds no control for individual-level indicators. In [Table 21.5](#), the three different measures of life satisfaction are added in groups of two different controls. Models 1, 3 and 5 in each indicator include only individual-level

**Table 21.2** Distribution of well-being on degree of urbanism.

Urbanism	Satisfaction 1	Satisfaction 2	Unhappiness
Outskirts	7.76	7.98	2.55
Rural	7.73	7.91	2.60
Semi-urban	7.62	7.83	2.67
Urban	7.62	7.76	2.71

**Table 21.3** Distribution of well-being on level of neighbourhood deprivation.

Level of deprivation	Satisfaction 1	Satisfaction 2	Unhappiness
1st decile	7.78	7.92	2.58
2nd decile	7.77	7.92	2.65
3rd decile	7.78	7.96	2.59
4th decile	7.66	7.85	2.62
5th decile	7.68	7.88	2.63
6th decile	7.68	7.84	2.61
7th decile	7.67	7.87	2.62
8th decile	7.65	7.88	2.65
9th decile	7.71	7.90	2.62
10th decile	7.53	7.72	2.72

items, while models 2, 4 and 6 include a simple form of dummy control for degree of urbanism. Since the results are from survey data, the neighbourhood effect in models 2, 4 and 6 is added as an individual effect and not as a dummy control in the form of  $Y = (\alpha + \gamma_{ij}) + \beta_i X_i + \varepsilon_i$  where  $\gamma_{ij}$  is the  $j$ th urbanism category for the  $i$ th person. This could technically be done for the deprivation index as well, but since the regression is done on survey data, the dummy control for more than 5,000 individual areas would result in a potentially fragile and skewed model, since each dummy for area would contain, in some cases, only a single observation.

The individual-level factors in models 1, 3 and 5 indicate that educational attainment primarily affects single-item and composite satisfaction. While the effect indicates that higher levels of educational attainment decrease the overall level of life satisfaction, the effects found must be said to be primarily of theoretical significance. Comparing the full range of educational attainment, this only affects satisfaction with .1 per cent in the satisfaction

**Table 21.4** Distribution of well-being on neighbourhood deprivation and degree of urbanism.

Urbanism	1st decile	2nd decile	3rd decile	4th decile	5th decile	5th decile	7th decile	8th decile	9th decile	10th decile
<b>Outskirts</b>										
Satisfaction 1	8.03	7.74	8.10	7.80	7.79	7.86	7.73	7.71	7.75	7.64
Satisfaction 2	8.07	8.00	8.22	7.98	7.95	8.01	7.97	7.98	7.99	7.89
Unhappiness	2.44	2.51	2.52	2.58	2.57	2.51	2.54	2.58	2.54	2.54
<b>Rural</b>										
Satisfaction 1	7.79	7.88	7.76	7.65	7.76	7.70	7.75	7.69	7.76	7.56
Satisfaction 2	7.95	8.00	7.99	7.85	7.94	7.88	7.93	7.91	7.95	7.72
Unhappiness	2.57	2.53	2.59	2.64	2.60	2.54	2.55	2.62	2.60	2.73
<b>Semi-urban</b>										
Satisfaction 1	7.80	7.75	7.76	7.63	7.44	7.54	7.50	7.61	7.79	7.36
Satisfaction 2	8.02	7.92	7.95	7.85	7.78	7.70	7.73	7.85	7.96	7.58
Unhappiness	2.56	2.68	2.48	2.56	2.67	2.72	2.78	2.73	2.60	2.94
<b>Urban</b>										
Satisfaction 1	7.76	7.71	7.71	7.58	7.51	7.45	7.48	7.18	7.51	7.32
Satisfaction 2	7.89	7.86	7.85	7.74	7.73	7.60	7.63	7.31	7.60	7.39
Unhappiness	2.59	2.73	2.67	2.65	2.75	2.84	2.87	2.99	2.78	2.98

**Table 21.5** Regression models.

	Satisfaction single item		Satisfaction composite		Unhappiness composite	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Educational length (months)	-0.0007*	-0.0007*	-0.0025***	-0.0024***	0.0003	0.0002
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Unemployment (days of year)	-0.0011***	-0.0011***	-0.0008***	-0.0008***	0.0004***	0.0004***
	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)
Income	0.0000***	0.0000***	0.0000	0.0000	-0.0000	-0.0000
	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)
Age	0.0066***	0.0061***	0.0103***	0.0097***	-0.0074***	-0.0070***
	(0.0008)	(0.0008)	(0.0007)	(0.0007)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)
Ethnicity	-0.1513***	-0.1214**	-0.3141***	-0.2857***	0.6266***	0.6109***
	(0.0515)	(0.0518)	(0.0434)	(0.0436)	(0.0566)	(0.0569)
Male	-0.0732***	-0.0737***	0.1920***	0.1918***	0.1678***	0.1679***
	(0.0229)	(0.0229)	(0.0193)	(0.0193)	(0.0251)	(0.0251)
Deprivation index		-0.4438***		-0.3803***		0.2007
		(0.1127)		(0.0947)		(0.1234)

*(continued)*

Table 21.5 (Cont.)

	Satisfaction single item		Satisfaction composite		Unhappiness composite	
Degree of urbanism (outskirt ref.)						
Rural		-0.0778** (0.0315)		-0.0995*** (0.0264)		0.0726** (0.0345)
Semi-urban		-0.1501*** (0.0401)		-0.1459*** (0.0337)		0.0676 (0.0439)
Urban		-0.1647*** (0.0364)		-0.1879*** (0.0306)		0.1323*** (0.0399)
Constant	7.6669*** (0.0806)	7.9793*** (0.1066)	7.5473*** (0.0678)	7.8334*** (0.0896)	2.6031*** (0.0883)	2.4437*** (0.1168)
Observations	26,600	26,600	26,567	26,567	26,562	26,562
R-squared	0.0070	0.0081	0.0171	0.0187	0.0104	0.0108
Standard errors in parentheses ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05						

measurements while insignificant when measuring unhappiness. The same can be said for income, but this is only significant in single-item satisfaction. Unemployment indicates that an increase in unemployment results in less life satisfaction, but again only to a small degree. The cumulative biggest effect can be found when looking at age, where older age results in less life satisfaction but, interestingly, also less unhappiness. This could be explained by more conservative responses with age and not using the outer categories as much. By far the biggest effect can be found when looking at ethnicity. Non-ethnic Danes are 6.2 per cent less happy than the ethnic Danes, even when controlling for other social and socio-economic factors.

Gender is interesting because the effects from the single-item satisfaction contradict the findings by the composite scale. The single-item measurement indicates that males are slightly less satisfied than females, but looking at the composite measurement, the opposite is true. This could be because the composite measurement considers specific parts of satisfaction like family life and social relations and thus requires a compartmentalisation. It might also be that since the effect of the single item is significantly smaller than in the other two, that they capture life satisfaction to a higher degree. Nonetheless, in the other model, women tend to be less satisfied. Interestingly, men also seem to be more unhappy. This could indicate a conflict, since although unhappiness is thought of as the opposite of life satisfaction, this is actually not the case. While life satisfaction is correlated with unhappiness at .5, it is still quite possible to be satisfied with family and social relations while also feeling sad and unhappy on a personal level. Thus, while men are more satisfied looking at the composite measurement, they are also experiencing higher levels of unhappiness.

Looking at the dummy control models (models 2, 4 and 6), there are no or only nominal changes to the effects of education, unemployment, income and gender. The primary reason for the socio-economic effects not changing is because they are already being captured by the area of residence, while gender might be independent from place of living. The effect of age drops slightly, which indicates that area deprivation as well as degree of urbanism moderates, if only slightly, the effect of age. Ethnicity is the variable on the individual level that is affected the most by place-specific control. Overall, the effect of ethnicity is reduced in all models and this could indicate that degree of urbanism absorbs some of that effect, but most likely it has to do with the fact that the direct migration of refugees often centres around urban environments.

The area-specific indicators are still highly significant with individual-level controls and the effects are in accordance with the descriptive statistics. An increase in deprivation results in lower levels of life satisfaction on both the single item and the composite item and a higher level of unhappiness.

Degree of urbanism, as seen earlier, has an effect on all items in the sense that higher levels of urbanism result in lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of unhappiness.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Quality of life in Denmark is equal parts uniform and highly varied. While Danes are, in general, very content with life and very happy, there are still comparatively large variances within small geographical entities. Denmark is unique in many ways, and since its relative size is so small, it makes it difficult to truly consider 'outskirts' of Denmark as outskirts. No matter the starting point, one can drive to any location (not considering islands) in five hours, so there are very few places that are truly remote. Nonetheless, Denmark has a sharp divide between urban and rural areas and considering mobility is more than just the driving distance to the nearest larger city, it is not surprising that the degree of urbanism affects the overall quality of life.

In this chapter, quality of life has been reduced to three overall measures: single-item satisfaction that deals with the question how the respondent, all in all, feels about life these days; composite satisfaction that deals with social relations, family life and daily life; and composite unhappiness that deals with sadness, happiness and feeling worried. In short, there is no single type of area (be it outskirts, rural, semi-urban or urban) that is free from variation at neighbourhood level. Likewise, there is no evidence to support that area type is in a direct causal relationship with quality of life, but there are trends that point to the fact that the outskirts are, in general, more content with life and less unhappy. There is virtually no difference when comparing the least deprived neighbourhoods in an urban setting with the most deprived neighbourhoods in the outskirts. The largest differences the data found is when comparing urban settings with their counterparts in the outskirts while also considering degree of deprivation. Subjective quality of life is rated much higher in the outskirts than in the urban environments on all three measurements and even when controlling for individual-level indicators, this effect persists. While degree of deprivation and urbanism cannot account for the full variation in quality of life, it is the single most explanatory combination present in this data.

These results are very much contrary to what one would find looking only at municipality-level data. Considering social life at the neighbourhood level draws out important differences within the socio-geographical landscape and adds a very important nuance to our interpretation of the data: even though the socio-economic mapping shows that the most well off often live

in the cities, quality of life is, though not by a large margin, higher at the neighbourhood level in the more rural areas than it is in urban settings.

This calls for a discussion of why. Why are neighbourhoods in the outskirts in general more content than their urban counterparts? First, it is important to notice that, in general, Denmark is a very content and happy country. The variances here are not between low and high quality of life but instead a small gradient within very high quality of life. Furthermore, the differences found here are based on subjective quality of life and not objective measurements such as health or socio-economics. This means that it reduces to a state of mind; to what extent do I feel content with my life? Nonetheless, this feeling is more persistent in the outskirts and rural parts of Denmark than in the urban parts, and one explanation could be that the way the question is 'felt' is different in the more rural parts. When asked 'How do you feel about life', it is up to you to decide what you consider 'life' and 'feel' to mean. Historically, the more rural parts of Denmark are based on traditions of farming and fishing and, to quote Hans Kirk when describing the sense of the early 1900s local western Jutlandish societies, 'The fishermen of the western sea knew what they knew. God had whipped them with western winds, demise, and poverty. The catch had failed year after year, sand drift and sea mist had ravaged the parish and brothers and friends had drowned before their eyes' (Kirk, 1928). The stark contrast to the cities has dissipated since the early 1900s, but the cultural phenomena still persist especially in the smaller towns – life is satisfactory if we have our health and don't go hungry. This is, of course, just one perspective of a much larger aspect of quality of life. In the end, even though we do find differences and to some extent large differences, Denmark is still a country with an exceptionally high subjective quality of life. Nonetheless, the main takeaway from dissecting the geography and measuring quality of life at neighbourhood level is that even in neighbourhoods of close proximity there is evidence for a change in perceived quality of life – to fully capture phenomena such as happiness, sadness and contentedness one needs to accurately describe the settings from where these feelings are located and these are, as shown in this chapter, much more local than one might think.

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## Outdoor recreation and the well-being of rural residents: insight from Scotland

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### Introduction

Living surrounded by ‘nature’ and close to opportunities for outdoor recreation is both a benefit of rural living for many and a driver of counter-urbanisation, including through second-home ownership (Adamiak et al., 2017; Halfacree, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic has further heightened awareness of the value and potential of rural spaces as sites for healthy living, working, recreation and domestic food production (Weeden, 2020). As such, the natural environment has been implicated as a driver of higher levels of subjective well-being in rural areas (Gilbert et al., 2016; Verheij et al., 2008). However, simplistic narratives on the virtues of living in nature, which play into the nostalgic notion of the rural idyll, can distract from the less-than-idyllic realities of rural life (Shucksmith, 2018), and well-being in rural communities will be heavily influenced by individual and place-based circumstances.

This chapter explores the contributions that outdoor recreation and access to nature more generally make to well-being in rural areas using Scotland as a case study. In Scotland, rights of access to the land for recreational purposes (the ‘right to roam’) is well established. Current policy around outdoor recreation therefore focuses on promoting uptake of opportunities for outdoor recreation. This objective cross-cuts policy areas including environment and natural resources, health, spatial planning and tourism and is being delivered through initiatives such as the ‘Our Natural Health Service’ programme, led by NatureScot (Scotland’s nature agency), which aims to increase public awareness of the benefits of outdoor activity and embed nature-based health promotion initiatives into health and social care services.

Against this policy background, we present a rural viewpoint on relationships between natural environments and well-being, a field of research which has hitherto focused largely on urban settings and populations. The chapter begins by outlining theories linking outdoor

recreation and well-being at the individual level and then discusses nature-based interventions to promote outdoor recreation in rural areas. It goes on to assess the overall contribution of outdoor recreation to the well-being of rural residents and examines issues around the inclusivity and accessibility of rural outdoor recreation opportunities. Finally, we consider the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to influence outdoor recreation participation (and inequalities in participation) in the long term.

### **Outdoor recreation and well-being: definitions and theory**

In this chapter we draw on Bell et al.'s (2007) definition of outdoor recreation as referring to 'activities that people undertake out of doors in places where they can access nature or green areas, mainly as part of their daily or weekend routines' (p. 6). At the heart of this definition is the idea of recreational activities, which may be passive (e.g. sitting enjoying a view, picnicking) or active (e.g. walking, running, cycling, skiing, watersports), taking place in an environment where nature rather than built structures dominate. Additionally, we use the term 'outdoors' throughout to refer to open spaces in both urban and rural areas including woodland, parks, farmland, paths and beaches (Colley & Irvine, 2018). Due to its urban connotations, the term 'greenspace' has purposefully been avoided (unless specifically referring to vegetated spaces in urban areas). Lastly, we take a holistic perspective on the potential health and well-being effect of outdoor recreation. The WHO 1948 definition of health includes physical, mental and social well-being (World Health Organisation, 1998). We extend this biopsychosocial model of well-being (Engel, 1977) to consider spiritual well-being (McKee & Chappel, 1992) and broaden the mental dimension to include both its cognitive and affective components (Andrews & McKennell, 1980). Our conceptualisation of well-being thus incorporates five dimensions – physical, cognitive, affective, social and spiritual.

Spending time outdoors in nature is associated with a range of salutogenic effects, particularly in relation to mental health and well-being (Bratman et al., 2019). The evidence base in this area has grown significantly since 2010, largely driven by an increasing interest in promoting population well-being and providing antidotes to the stress of modern (primarily urban) living. Despite a rather urban-centred focus on the well-being benefits of greenspace, the types of benefits described and the mechanisms or mediation pathways through which these benefits are thought to be derived are equally applicable to rural settings. Markevych et al. (2017) characterise these pathways largely in terms of their role in restoration (restoring capacities which may have become depleted) and instoration (building capacities). Restoration in natural environments is largely discussed in relation to two

processes: attention restoration and stress recovery. Attention restoration is a psychological process by which we are restored from a state of cognitive (attentional) fatigue through spending time in an environment that attracts our attention involuntarily (a quality termed ‘fascination’) and that promotes a feeling of ‘being away’ or escape from demands on our capacity to direct attention (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995). Stress recovery refers to the strong positive emotions and reduction in psychophysiological stress that may be experienced in non-threatening natural environments, theorised to have an evolutionary basis (Ulrich, 1986, 1993).

In relation to outdoor recreation, these restorative (capacity restoring) effects of nature may also be accompanied by instorative (capacity building) effects, most notably through physical activity and/or social contact, both of which are known to support mental health and well-being (Hartig et al., 2014; Jennings & Bamkole, 2019). Positive experiences of outdoor recreation, whether they be relaxing or exhilarating, physically active or passive, alone or with others, can also carry other benefits to our moods and our overall well-being through the development and maintenance of emotional attachments to place, feelings of belonging, self-determination and personal growth, connectedness to the natural world, and spiritual experiences (Cleary et al., 2017; Houge Mackenzie & Hodge, 2020; Irvine et al., 2019; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) we have three basic needs that motivate our behaviour and underlie personal growth and well-being: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Houge Mackenzie & Hodge (2020) use self-determination theory to explain how outdoor recreation can contribute to subjective well-being by fulfilling these needs.

Many outdoor recreation experiences take place in familiar locations close to home; theories centring on people’s relationships with place can thus bring further insight into outdoor recreation’s influence on well-being. Scotland’s People and Nature Survey 2019/20 (conducted pre-COVID-19) found that more than three-quarters of visits to the outdoors were to places visited at least once a week, and over three-quarters were to locations within 5 miles (8km) from home (Stewart & Eccleston, 2020b). Taking a place-based perspective on outdoor recreation and well-being, the everyday natural places where outdoor leisure experiences occur are often the locus of strong emotional attachments, and such experiences in place may contribute towards ongoing processes of shaping and reshaping personal identity (Colley & Craig, 2019; Irvine et al., 2013).

### **Interventions to promote outdoor recreation in rural areas**

As a result of the development of the evidence base on the health and well-being benefits of contact with nature, strategies to promote the uptake of outdoor

recreation have been in ascendance in public health and environmental policy. Here we focus on group outdoor health walks as a specific form of nature-based health intervention (Shanahan et al., 2019) being employed to engage rural communities in outdoor recreation. Health walks represent local opportunities for low-intensity outdoor recreation in a social setting, led by a volunteer walk leader and usually run through third-sector organisations (Irvine et al., 2020). We discuss our findings on health walks initiatives, drawing upon data from two research projects incorporating case study research within the Cairngorms National Park in Scotland. Study 1, conducted in 2015–16, examined constraints to outdoor recreation for older people across three geographically varied case studies (urban, coastal town, rural). Study 2, conducted in 2016–18, evaluated a health walks programme run by the national park authority to promote outdoor recreation by local residents.

### *Social dimensions of health walks initiatives*

In both studies, older people featured among the primary beneficiaries of these rural health walks programmes. Older adults are a particularly important demographic in the context of rural nature-based health interventions given the ageing profile of rural residents across Europe, driven largely by out-migration of young people, in-migration of people in mid-life who then age in place, and in-migration of people at or around retirement (Currie & Philip, 2019). Our qualitative case study research (Study 1) found that health walks can help overcome some of the key constraints to outdoor recreation for older people. These include social constraints around not having company to visit the outdoors with, including as a result of transitions in older people's social lives that commonly arise in relation to this life stage such as the death or declining health or mobility of spouses or friends (Colley et al., 2016, 2019; Currie, Colley & Irvine, 2021). At the same time, the social context of health walks can deter some people who would prefer to focus on the natural setting rather than engage in conversation. In Study 2 (Irvine et al., 2020), while the majority of participants' motivations to join were health-related, some were motivated by the social element, and it was this aspect that emerged as the most important factor motivating participants to continue to attend week after week. This was reflected in the study of older people's constraints to outdoor recreation (Study 1), where participants who had been involved in health walks reported valuing the social benefits they experienced above all others, a finding which has also been reported elsewhere (Carpenter, 2013).

Health walks, and the social capital developed within health walks groups, can help to overcome some constraints experienced specifically (or more often) in rural contexts. Older rural residents in our comparative case study

research (Study 1) were (unlike some urban participants) unlikely to report feeling fears for their personal safety in relation to the possibility of being attacked or accosted by others. However, several expressed a sense of vulnerability compounded by characteristics of the rural setting, such as a lack of accessible surfaced paths (and accompanying fears of falling on uneven ground) and unreliable mobile phone signals. Both studies highlighted that the social context of health walks, as well as the route having been scoped out in advance by a trained walk leader, provides a sense of security in the rural context (Irvine et al., 2022). Depending on car transport to access safe routes may also constrain walking in rural areas. One participant related an example of how social capital developed within their established health walks group helped one member to overcome this – when he became no longer able to drive other members provided lifts to enable him to continue to attend (Colley et al., 2016). We have used these and other qualitative insight to develop a conceptual model to facilitate assessment of the social dimensions of nature-based interventions such as group outdoor health walks (Irvine et al., 2022).

It is also notable that the majority of health walks participants in our studies were women. In their work on working groups, Morris et al. (2019) suggest that these nature-based health interventions are particularly successful at engaging older women, for which such groups may act as a ‘lifeline’. Some of our female participants felt that men may be put off by the gender imbalance, and one of the male participants stated a belief that a few of the women in the group would prefer not to include men at all (Colley et al., 2016; Currie, Colley & Irvine, 2021). Nature-based interventions aiming to change outdoor recreation behaviour should therefore consider how programmes might engage (or fail to engage) specific target demographics, including intersectional demographics.

### *Physical activity and physical health benefits*

The increased capability to be physically active and the opportunity for social interaction were clearly benefits from involvement in the group outdoor health walk. One person noted that they had not seen the doctor since they started walking, and another noted that they were happier with life (Irvine et al., 2020). The health walk provided an important structure through which to develop a habit of walking outside. The incorporation of activity trackers as part of the twelve-week health walk programme (Study 2) was found to motivate participants to join the group and added to a sense of being an ally to support others on their fitness journey. A few participants mentioned the importance of the activity trackers for continued engagement; the step counts provided information about weekly progress and made them think more about their fitness levels.



*Practicalities of nature-based intervention provision in rural areas*

There is value in having a range of different walking group opportunities locally, targeted at different levels of ability as health walks are often a bit too gentle for some or too advanced for others. Individuals can then be supported to move, where appropriate, along a pathway of progression between walks pitched at different levels as health/mobility improves or declines (Colley et al., 2016). This poses challenges for providers to resource and staff outdoor walking programmes, and may be particularly salient in rural areas due to the relative sparsity of the population served and the relatively small pool of beneficiaries in a locality. Where a range of different options is available locally, these may vary in relation to the institutions involved and formality of the group governance; this diversity may mean that disruptions (e.g. to funding, leadership) threatening one walking group may lead to gaps in the pathway of progression for individuals.

Overall, our findings on nature-based interventions to promote outdoor recreation in the rural context demonstrate the potential value to participants but raise a number of questions about how investment in outdoor recreation promotion might be targeted geographically and within populations. Future research might consider the potential to overcome the challenges to delivering nature-based interventions appropriately tailored to the needs and desires of different target populations in low-density areas as it is clear that there is no ‘one size fits all’ nature-based intervention to promote participation across groups. In the rest of this chapter, we take a step back from place-based case studies to examine more widely the role of outdoor recreation in the well-being of rural residents and inequalities in outdoor recreation participation in different geographies.

**The contribution of outdoor recreation to well-being in rural areas**

In Scotland, where 83 per cent of the population resides in urban areas, the countryside is often framed as a resource for outdoor recreation for city-dwellers and tourists; a destination for holidays and weekend trips, and an opportunity to escape from the towns and cities and reconnect with nature. Yet, as discussed above, data on the characteristics of visits to the outdoors highlights that very often people’s outdoor recreation takes place during short trips made close to home. In this chapter we focus on the role of rural nature and outdoor recreation in the lives of rural rather than urban residents as consumers of rural nature.

Previous research investigating variation in subjective well-being across urban and rural areas in Scotland found some evidence of living in remote rural areas being advantageous, as opposed to in accessible rural or

non-rural areas (Gilbert et al., 2016). It was suggested that the differences in self-reported levels of life satisfaction observed in that study may be the result of benefits of remote rural living relating to environmental factors (i.e. greater access to natural environments and outdoor recreation opportunities) or social factors (such as greater levels of social capital and more cohesive communities). Epidemiological research has identified that some areas exhibit better population health and well-being than would be expected given the level of deprivation and structural inequalities associated with them (Cairns-Nagi & Bambra, 2013). These places that ‘defy the odds’ have been conceptualised as ‘health-resilient’ areas, with high levels of place attachment, natural capital and social capital implicated as factors supporting their resilience (Cairns-Nagi & Bambra, 2013). More recent work shows that rural communities with high levels of social capital are likely to have high scores of resilience following the COVID-19 pandemic (Currie, McMorran, et al., 2021).

Building on our previous research on geographical variation in well-being in Scotland, we sought to explore the extent to which the observed disparities in different types of rural and non-rural areas was replicated in a larger sample and using a different measure of well-being. We also extended the analysis to test the hypothesis that outdoor recreation and/or social factors can explain differences between urban–rural geographies. For this analysis we used data from the Scottish Household Survey, a large-scale population-representative social survey conducted annually by the Scottish government, combining two waves (2014 and 2016). A hierarchical regression model (Table 22.2) was specified to examine the well-being according to urbanity/rurality; outdoor recreation participation (whether respondent reported at least weekly visits to the outdoors or not); community belonging (low vs high feelings of belonging to the neighbourhood); and neighbourhood social capital (low vs high scores, scores derived from four items). Rurality was represented using the Scottish government’s six-fold urban–rural classification, a key feature of which is its distinction between *accessible* and *remote* rural areas, based on travel times to population centres. In respect to outdoor recreation, this distinction is salient in that it relates to the suite of (indoor and outdoor) recreational opportunities available to residents as well as to the differing employment and economic profiles of remote areas in comparison to more accessible or peri-urban localities. Well-being was measured using the short version Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009).

After accounting for area deprivation and individual-level socio-demographic factors, step 1 of the model showed that well-being was significantly higher in most of the urban–rural classes as compared to large urban areas (used here as a reference group). The exception was remote

**Table 22.1** Regression model predicting mental well-being (SWEMWBS score).

	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Large urban areas (ref)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Other urban areas	.145*	.074	.143	.074	.058	.073
Accessible small towns	.530**	.111	.522**	.111	.377**	.111
Remote small towns	.423**	.164	.372*	.164	.313	.162
Accessible rural areas	.220*	.106	.197	.106	.050	.105
Remote rural areas	.219	.137	.165	.137	–.021	.136
Outdoor recreation (>= weekly vs less often)	–	–	.428**	0.61	.391*	.061
Neighbourhood belonging (low vs high)	–	–	–	–	–.386**	.075
Social capital (low vs high)	–	–			–1.214**	.065
N	19,245		19,245		19,078	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.110		.112 (Δ.002)		.133 (Δ.021)	

\*\*p≤0.01 \*p≤0.05. Ref = reference category Adjusted for age, sex, education, disability, ethnicity, religion, marital status, sexual orientation, area deprivation.

rural areas where well-being levels were not significantly different to the reference group. This is unlikely to reflect a lack of statistical power; although the rural remote sample was much smaller than the large urban areas reference group (n=1,159 compared to n=7,258), a significant difference was detected for the smaller ‘remote small towns’ subgroup (n=726), and SWEMWBS has been found to be sensitive to variations in mental well-being within much smaller samples. This finding contrasts with that of previous research which found higher life satisfaction in remote rural areas (Gilbert et al., 2016); rather, it lends some support to a theorised U-shaped relationship between urbanity/rurality and well-being (Verheij et al., 2008). Our operationalisation of urban–rural character does, however, eschew the concept of an urban–rural continuum in favour of discrete classifications based on a dual axis of settlement size and remoteness. Accessible rural areas were associated with higher levels of well-being than large urban areas, yet the greatest well-being advantage appeared to be associated with living in an accessible small town.

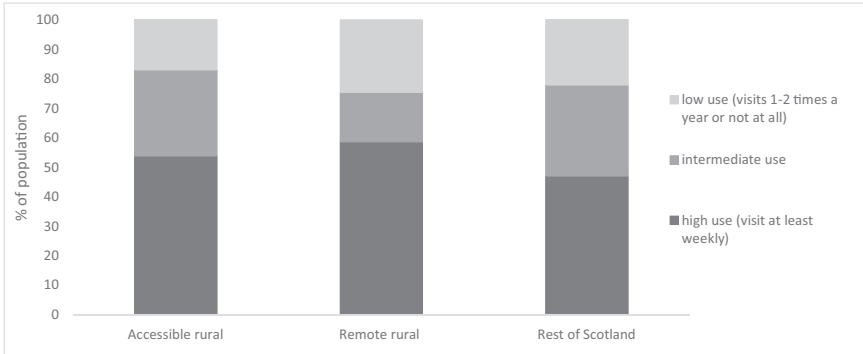
Steps 2 and 3 of the model investigated the role of outdoor recreation, neighbourhood belonging and social capital as mediators of the observed

differences between urban–rural geographies. Adding outdoor recreation to the model (step 2) indicated that frequently visiting the outdoors was associated with higher well-being; however, the modest changes in the model  $R^2$  and B coefficients for the urban–rural classes indicated that outdoor recreation participation does not explain the differences between urban–rural classes found in step 1. In step 3, where neighbourhood belonging and social capital are added, the model explains more of the variance in well-being and the differences between urban–rural classes are attenuated to a greater extent. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, we cannot draw conclusions about causal effects at play. It is possible that even after controlling for socio-economic factors such as area deprivation and education, associations between outdoor recreation and well-being here are driven by self-selection of people with higher well-being into areas with greater outdoor recreation opportunities. However, from this analysis we can conclude, first, that in considering geographical variation in well-being we must go beyond broad-brush urban/rural dichotomies as the variation *within* rural areas matters for well-being. Furthermore, it seems that the choice of well-being outcome may also determine the extent to which we observe differences across geographies varying in urbanity/rurality, as across our analysis presented here and that in Gilbert et al. (2016) we found different results for each of the three well-being measures modelled (SWEMWBS, life satisfaction and also the GHQ-12 measure of psychological distress which was not sensitive to urban–rural class [Gilbert et al., 2016]).

### **Inequality and inclusion in outdoor recreation participation among rural residents**

There is a well-established international literature on inequalities in outdoor recreation participation, yet much of the research focuses either on urban greenspace or on outdoor recreation in the countryside by a geographically undifferentiated base of users or with an implicit focus on urban visitors to rural nature (Johansen et al., 2021). Consequently, less is known about issues of inequality and exclusion in relation to rural residents' outdoor activity specifically.

We explored participation in outdoor recreation in rural areas in Scotland, using combined data from the Scottish Household Survey 2014 and 2016 (N=19,441). Figure 21.1 illustrates the frequency with which residents in accessible rural areas, remote rural areas and the rest of Scotland visit the outdoors for recreation. From this we can see that those living in rural areas are more likely to report a high level of participation (defined here as visiting at least on a weekly basis, in correspondence with the Scottish government's



**Figure 22.1** Percentage of residents reporting high, low and intermediate use of the outdoors for recreational purposes. (Source: Scottish Household Survey).

National Performance Framework indicator) than in non-rural Scotland. However, the pattern in remote rural areas is notably polarised. Remote rural areas boast the highest proportion of residents engaging in at least weekly outdoor recreation (at 58.6 per cent, in comparison to 53.8 per cent in accessible rural and 47 per cent in the rest of Scotland), yet also the highest proportion engaging infrequently (1–2 times a year) or not at all (at 24.5 per cent, versus 17.6 per cent in accessible rural and 22.1 per cent in the rest of Scotland) (Figure 22.1).

It would be easy to assume that rural living automatically confers greater access to outdoor recreation opportunities, yet such an assumption is problematic for a number of reasons. First, living close to nature does not necessarily mean excellent physical access to natural environments. In Scotland, there are public access rights to most of the land, yet this is not the case in all countries. Even where access rights are established, poorer transport accessibility and active travel infrastructure (Hansen et al., 2015; Wilson & Copus, 2018), as well as potentially conflicting objectives for the land (Brown, 2016), can limit rural residents' access to high-amenity areas. Second, aside from these physical characteristics of rural space, rural residents will, in common with urban-dwelling recreationists, vary in terms of their capabilities for accessing outdoor recreation opportunities – both in terms of physical capabilities and less tangible psychological capabilities – and the constraints to access they experience (Davies, 2018).

To explore variation in outdoor recreation participation between different population subgroups within these urban–rural classes we ran binary logistic regression models (Table 22.2). The models predicted the likelihood of reporting low use of the outdoors, and included covariates selected to represent groups with legal protections from discrimination on

**Table 22.2** Odds ratios in binary logistic regression predicting low outdoor recreation participation (visiting the outdoors not at all or only 1–2 times per year). Bold text indicates statistical significance.

	Accessible rural	Remote rural	Rest of Scotland
	OR	OR	OR
Age 16–25	1.296	<b>.241**</b>	.985
Age 26–35	.709	<b>.481*</b>	<b>.793**</b>
Age 36–45	.628	.805	<b>.814**</b>
Age 46–55 (ref)	–	–	–
Age 56–65	1.368	.872	<b>1.282**</b>
Age 66–75	<b>2.067**</b>	1.254	<b>1.651**</b>
Age 76+	<b>2.555**</b>	<b>2.210**</b>	<b>3.069**</b>
Female	.978	<b>1.471*</b>	<b>1.105*</b>
BAME <sup>a</sup>	.742	<b>11.100*</b>	<b>2.368*</b>
Disability	<b>3.495**</b>	<b>3.374**</b>	<b>3.596**</b>
LGBT0 <sup>b</sup>	.627	1.766	.663
SIMD1 <sup>c</sup> (most deprived)	.954	2.280	<b>2.383**</b>
SIMD2	<b>2.162**</b>	.925	<b>2.060**</b>
SIMD3	<b>2.001**</b>	.794	<b>1.618**</b>
SIMD4	1.439	1.005	<b>1.291**</b>
SIMD5 (least deprived, ref)	–	–	–
Degree level education	<b>.388**</b>	<b>.332**</b>	<b>.421*</b>
N	2242	1145	15858
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.151	.180	.182

\*\*p≤0.01 \*p≤0.05. Ref = reference category

<sup>a</sup>Black or other non-white minority ethnic group

<sup>b</sup>Lesbian, gay, bisexual or other

<sup>c</sup>Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation

the basis of ‘protected characteristics’ in the UK Equality Act 2010. In addition to these categorical variables representing the protected characteristics of age, disability status, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and marriage and civil partnership status, we included the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), which ranks small area units across Scotland according to area-level deprivation on a number of domains.

Across all geographies, those aged 76 and over were more likely than the 46–55-year-old reference group to report low participation. However, the odds ratios indicate that this disparity is narrowest in remote rural areas. Furthermore, in remote rural areas (in contrast to accessible rural) those aged 66–75 years were not significantly more likely to be infrequent or non-users. Another notable finding in relation to age was that in remote rural areas the youngest adults (aged 16–25) were significantly less likely to report low/no participation than the reference group. No such divergence was seen in accessible rural areas. This finding goes counter to perceptions of an underrepresentation of young people in rural landscapes (King & Church, 2013), and may relate both to a lack of access to indoor leisure opportunities for young adults in remote areas as well as to access to outdoor recreation opportunities in remote rural areas.

There were differences between remote and accessible rural areas in relation to gender and race/ethnicity. In remote rural areas the odds of residents from black and other non-white ethnic minority groups being infrequent/non-users were significantly higher than those of white residents, although it should be noted that this is based on a very small BAME subsample in remote rural areas (5 out of 1,159 remote rural residents). Askins' (2009) work on ethnicity and landscape perceptions highlights feelings of alienation on the part of those of racial minorities, with English rural landscapes seen as monocultural; similar feelings of exclusion may contribute to the ethnic disparity observed in the Scottish data. There was also a clear difference between men and women, with women significantly more likely to report low levels of outdoor recreation. Gendered constraints to outdoor recreation can relate to time, feelings of entitlement to leisure vs caring responsibilities, resources and fears of sexual violence (Ghimire et al., 2014; Henderson & Gibson, 2013). No such racial or gender disparities were observed in accessible rural areas. These findings point to a need to address outdoor recreation inclusion particularly in remote rural areas, with non-white residents, women and (as in other geographies) people with disabilities being under-represented in terms of their use of the outdoors. Furthermore, one aspect which we do not address in the present analysis are potential inequalities in outdoor engagement across intersectional identity classes (i.e. representing the interaction of membership of multiple marginalised groups) such as women of ethnic minority backgrounds or women who have disabilities. Consideration of the ways in which people who are positioned at these intersections may have unique and complex experiences of inequity as relates to their likelihood of participating in outdoor recreation is essential to ensure that policies and interventions designed to redress inequalities do not result in some of their intended beneficiaries becoming further marginalised (Colley & Irvine, 2018).

### **Rural outdoor recreation in the context of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic had marked effects on (outdoor and indoor) recreational opportunities, as well as on aspects of working and home lives that can influence our time available for leisure and recreation. Some administrations prohibited all outdoor recreation during national and regional lockdowns, whereas in other areas outdoor recreation was permitted (albeit with limits on location, modes of access, duration and/or frequency). Outdoor recreation, for many, represented the only leisure opportunity available outside the home while social distancing and mobility restrictions were in place and has been recognised as playing an important role in supporting mental health and emotional resilience during the pandemic (Lopez et al., 2020).

While some sources reported an increased demand for greenspaces and natural environments in Scotland and elsewhere during lockdown (Stewart & Eccleston, 2020a; Venter et al., 2020), the majority of respondents in a UK survey during the first lockdown in spring 2020 said their use of greenspace had decreased (Burnett et al., 2021). The emerging evidence suggests considerable heterogeneity across space, time and population groups in outdoor recreation participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were at times challenges in meeting demand for greenspaces in high-density urban areas under physical distancing restrictions; at the same time, however, the spatial distribution of demand in rural areas is likely to have been much more variable according to the easing and tightening of mobility restrictions in specific areas. A survey in Scotland found that while participation in short walks, cycling and jogging was higher than normal during the first wave of the pandemic, visits to coastal and rural areas were down, as was participation in longer walks, hillwalking and off-road cycling (Stewart & Eccleston, 2020a). At the same time, the pandemic may be seen to have triggered conflict between rural and urban communities. Anecdotal and media reports of congestion in high-amenity rural spots and influxes of urban holidaymakers and second-home owners to rural and island areas followed the easing of mobility restrictions in the UK and elsewhere in Europe (Boterman, 2020). This led to concern about local outbreaks linked to the movement of people for recreation and has been seen to ‘spark anti-urban sentiment’ within rural communities, with the city being seen as a potential source of infection (Boterman, 2020, p. 514). Some have suggested that post-COVID-19 we may see a further increase in outdoor recreation-focused tourism as city-dwellers seek healing experiences as part of mental health recovery after the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic (Buckley & Westaway, 2020).

In relation to inequalities in use of the outdoors for recreation, evidence suggests that for some groups the disruption of COVID-19 may have brought



about a change in practices which has the potential to narrow inequalities in outdoor recreation participation for some but widen the gap for others. For example, in Scotland, survey data found that women were among the groups most likely to report increased use of the outdoors during the first wave of the pandemic (Stewart & Eccleston, 2020a). It is not, however, clear the extent to which increases among women have the potential to result in a longer-term narrowing of what we refer to as the ‘gender gap outdoors’ if greater participation by women is attributable to wider gender inequalities during COVID-19, e.g. in respect to rates of furlough and division of childcare responsibilities during school closures (Sevilla & Smith, 2020). At the same time, UK survey data from slightly earlier in the pandemic showed a contrasting picture, with women more likely to report decreased visits to greenspace than men (Burnett et al., 2021). These studies were, however, consistent in the observed effect of the pandemic on older people’s outdoor recreation behaviour. Both report older adults as among the groups most likely to report decreased use of the outdoors during lockdown (Burnett et al., 2021; Stewart & Eccleston, 2020a), with older people indicating concerns about safety and desires to follow the rules as limiting their time spent outdoors. In the post-COVID-19 era, it will be important to consider not only the constraints to outdoor recreation experienced by different groups, but also the potential of the COVID-19 pandemic to act as a moment of change in which the shifts in our everyday physical and social worlds bring about disruption and reshaping of habits (Verplanken & Wood, 2006), for better or worse.

## Conclusions

Much of the literature on the value of contact with nature and outdoor recreation focuses on the urban environment and the well-being of urban populations. In this chapter we presented a rural view of nature–health relations, drawing upon primary and secondary empirical analyses of data from Scotland and an interdisciplinary body of literature, to critically examine the value of outdoor recreation for the well-being of rural residents. Rural natural environments can be seen to represent a health resource which, through outdoor recreation, may support the well-being of rural residents. At the same time, however, rural populations are characterised by heterogeneity, and there is good reason to believe such heterogeneity may be reflected in the benefits experienced by different individuals and groups within the population. There are disparities in engagement in outdoor recreation between demographic groups in rural areas, suggesting that these benefits of rural living are far from equally distributed. Furthermore, we observed clear differences between accessible and remote rural areas,

including a polarisation in outdoor recreation participation in remote areas that is not seen in accessible rural areas. Future research might seek to further explore how nature-based health interventions in different geographies might best engage different subgroups of the rural population in order to open up greater opportunities for residents to enjoy the outdoors on their doorstep. Such interventions may be particularly valuable in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as actors representing health and environment interests in the public and third sector seek to build on progress in outdoor recreation uptake seen in some demographic groups, but also to engage other audiences who have had less engagement with the outdoors during the pandemic. As such, outdoor recreation may play a role in addressing the mental health crisis that we currently face and supporting the resilience of rural areas in the recovery from the pandemic.

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## Does urban green add to happiness? A research synthesis using an online finding archive

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### Introduction

During the last centuries, a process of urbanisation has been taking place all over the world. Today, more than half of the global population live in urban areas with an increase in high-density cities. This share of urban residence is expected to increase (Ritchie & Roser, 2019). Urbanisation is part of a wider process of societal modernisation, which also involves industrialisation, institutional specialisation and mental individualisation.

### *Qualms about urban life*

Social developments are typically attended with traditionalist counter-currents, and urbanisation is no exception to that. There have always been misgivings about urban life, in the past primarily about its moral climate, such as in the biblical case of Sodom and Gomorra, and today especially about the liveability of urban environments. Illustrative topics in the current discourse about urban living are pollution, crime, loneliness and mental disorder. These reservations have instigated efforts to incorporate rural elements in urban environments, such as when new-build city quarters were modelled architecturally as urban villages. The furthering of urban green is part of that movement and involved the building of public parks and planting trees in streets.

### *Biophilia theory*

The call for urban green was recently strengthened by the theory that humans have an innate need for contact with nature and in particular with other forms of life (Wilson, 1984). A variant of this theory holds that we feel better in the vegetated environments in which the human species developed (Rogers, 2019). This theory has inspired a movement in biophilic urban

design, a recent overview of which is found in Beatley (2017). An indication for the innate nature of this preference is seen in the existence of biophobic tendencies in humans, such as an aversion for spiders and snakes, which is likely to have involved better survival chances for our early forefathers.

This innate need does not necessarily give rise to a conscious preference for green environments. Cultural influences may make us sniff at nature but cannot prevent that we feel less well without it. Hence the theory legitimates biophilic policies for the sake of the public good, even if not demanded. Fostering urban green is one of these policies. Theoretically, the biophilia theory goes against the view that the evolution of humankind involved the vanishing of instinctual stimulus-response reactions, since we specialised in adaptation to different environments using the more flexible cognition enabled biologically by the development of the neocortex (Wentholt, 1989). In that view, we can live as well in a brick-and-concrete city, though the newly developed cognitive capacities may set their own demands for visual stimulation (Wentholt, 1969). Empirical evidence for the biophilia theory is mixed as yet. Confirmation is seen in a study that found faster recovery of patients situated in a hospital room with an outlook on a park than in rooms with an outlook on a car park (Ulrich, 1984). Although widely cited, this study has not been replicated to our knowledge. Beneficial effects of pet ownership on health (Anderson et al., 1992) have also been mentioned as proof for the biophilia theory, but can also be explained otherwise. Likewise, the self-reported gain in happiness and health of voluntary participants in organised walks in the wild (Richardson et al., 2016) can be due to other causes than meeting of an innate need for contact with nature. Similarly, the observation by Chang et al. (2020) that users of social media share more pictures of nature in relation to leisure and vacation activities does not prove the biophilia theory. A more detailed critical review of the biophilia theory is given in Joyce and DeBlock (2011).

#### *Implied and other possible effects of urban green on happiness*

Urban green provides another opportunity to test the biophilia theory. If true, citizens living in green areas will be happier than citizens living in brick-and-concrete environments, other conditions being equal. This effect on happiness is implied in the tenet that we have an innate need for contact with greenery; gratification of needs will foster happiness, its affective component in particular (to be discussed below), while frustration of that need will lower happiness.

Next to this direct effect, urban green can add to happiness in other ways. For instance, urban green will improve air quality and reduce the effects of hot summers, which is likely to add to happiness through effects on health.

Likewise, urban parks provide opportunities for outdoor leisure. Urban green may further attract richer residents and as such add to local amenities. However, urban green can also affect happiness negatively. Urban green is costly and its price is paid in local tax and housing prices. Urban green can also attract unwelcome animals, such as snakes, and create unsafe places.

### *Why focus on happiness?*

There is much research on the effect of urban green on various aspects of ‘well-being’, such as outdoor recreation ([Chapter 22](#) of this book). It is difficult to strike the balance of these effects; happiness captures the total effect. Notions of ‘well-being’ are often based on assumptions of what is good for people, e.g. that they take walks and have contact with neighbours. Happiness is free of such presumptions and measures ‘apparent quality of life’ (Veenhoven, 2005).

### **Research questions**

In this chapter we seek answers to the following questions:

1. Does urban greenery typically add to happiness? If so, how much?
2. Is the effect of urban green on happiness similar for everybody? If not, what kind of people benefit from urban green and what kind of people do not?
3. What kind of greenery will add most to happiness?
4. Does urban greenery add more to the affective component of happiness (how well one feels most of the time) than to the cognitive component (perception of getting what one wants)?

### *Social relevance*

Answers to questions 1, 2 and 3 will be relevant for urban policymakers who are faced with demands for more parks and trees in the streets and wonder whether this will really add to the happiness of citizens, what kind of greenery will add most, and whether investing in greenery is worth the cost. The information is also useful for individual citizens who consider buying a house and wonder whether buying a more expensive house in a green environment will make them happier, or whether they will be equally happy in a cheaper brick-and-concrete environment. Though people are typically aware of what they want, they are often unaware of what they need. Observed effects of urban green on happiness denote a link with general human needs.



### *Scientific relevance*

An affirmative answer to question 4 would support the biophilia theory. According to Veenhoven (2009), gratification of innate *needs* will manifest primarily in affective experience, mood level in particular, while realising culture-specific *wants* will rather result in cognitive contentment. This theoretical question is also of practical relevance for policymakers, who prefer to invest in enduring sources of happiness over putting money in time-bound cultural preference.

### *Approach*

We answer these questions by taking stock of the available empirical research findings on happiness and urban green. To that end, we will first define these concepts and select acceptable operationalisations on that basis. We next describe how findings were selected and entered in an online finding archive, the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 2020a). On that basis we will then consider the research questions one by one.

## Concepts and measures

### *Components and measures of happiness*

In classic philosophy, the word happiness is used to denote a ‘good life’ and as such is synonymous with the contemporary terms of ‘well-being’ and ‘quality of life’. In contemporary social sciences, the word is mostly used in the more limited sense of ‘satisfaction with life’ and also denoted as ‘subjective well-being’. In this chapter we follow this latter meaning and define happiness as the degree to which individuals judge the overall quality of their life as a whole favourably, or in other words, how much one likes the life one leads (Veenhoven, 1984). Another term for happiness is ‘life satisfaction’.

The overall evaluation of life draws on two different sources of information, regarded as ‘components’ of happiness. The *affective component* is how well one feels most of the time and is called the ‘hedonic level of affect’. The *cognitive component* is the extent to which one perceives getting from life what one wants from it and is called ‘contentment’. Veenhoven’s (2009) theory of how we assess how happy we are holds that the affective component reflects the degree to which universal human needs are met, while the cognitive component reflects the meeting of culturally relative aspirations (Kainulainen et al., 2018). If so, the biophilia theory would predict a stronger correlation with the affective component of happiness than with the cognitive component and less variability in correlation across cultures.

Since happiness is defined as a mental state of which we are aware, it can be measured by asking people. Some illustrative questions are:

- *Question on overall happiness:*
  - Taking all together, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?
- *Questions on hedonic level of affect:*
  - Would you say that you are usually cheerful or dejected?
  - How is your mood today? (Repeated over several days)
- *Question on contentment:*
  - Here is a picture of a ladder. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom represents the worst possible life for you. Where on the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time?

A review of strengths and weaknesses of measures of happiness and their applicability in different contexts is available in Veenhoven (2017).

### *Urban green*


Urban greenspaces are ‘areas with vegetation within or partly embraced by urban fabric ..., which usually has recreational or ornamental character and is usually accessible for the public’ (European Environment Agency, 2019). There is green within the built urban environment, such as parks, and green outside urban boundaries, such as woods, which are easily accessible for urbanites. Within the built environment there is further a difference between outside green, such as trees in streets and inside green, such as plants in homes and workplaces. A further difference is between kinds of vegetation, such as grass fields and bushes, and landscapes, such as hills or water courses. The occurrence of urban green is assessed in the investigated studies in objective and subjective ways. An objective way is assessment by satellites; a subjective way is the respondent’s perception of their access to greenspaces. A question of this kind reads:

How many of the native bush, forest, nature reserve or open green spaces in your locale can you easily get to? ‘All of them’, ‘most of them’, ‘some of them’, ‘only a few of them’, ‘none of them’, ‘never want or need to go to any of them’, ‘do not know’ or ‘refused’.

(Ambrey et al., 2014)

### **Method: research synthesis from a finding archive**

As noted above, we seek answers to our research questions by taking stock of the available research findings. This is called ‘research synthesis’. For this purpose, we use an existing finding archive, the World Database of


**WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS**  
ARCHIVE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SUBJECTIVE ENJOYMENT OF LIFE  

[This database](#) • [Collections](#) • [Search](#) • [Reports](#) • [Related](#) • [Research Field](#) • [FAQs](#) • [About us](#) • [Join us](#)

**Study Hart et al. (2018): study ZZ Europe 2014** print

**Public:** 18+ aged, urban areas, European countries, 2014

**Survey name:** INT-SPOTLIGHT survey

**Sample:**

**Respondents:** N = 5205

**Non Response:** 89.2%

**Assessment:** Questionnaire: web  
online survey

**Correlate**

**Author's Label:** water and green spaces

**Our Classification:** LOCAL: GEOGRAPHY » » » Local green


**Remarks:** Assessed using Google Street View

**Distribution:** Range: 0.00-0.13, M =0.39+0.34

**Operationalization:** % surface water and green spaces

**Observed Relation with Happiness**

Happiness Measure	Statistics	Elaboration / Remarks	
Q-H7:7-sq-v-5-f	ORO = + p < .05	Odds for being..	ORO CI95
		- very happy	1,82 [1,15;2,92]
		- moderately happy	1,37 [1,02;2,42]
		- neutral	1,48 [0,89;2,46]
		- unhappy (reference)	



The World Database of Happiness is based in the Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organization  
 EHERO of Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Director: Ruut Veenhoven.




Figure 23.1 Example of a finding page.

Happiness (Veenhoven 2020b). This database is a collection of research findings on happiness in the sense of life satisfaction. It contains both *distributional findings* on how happy people are in different times and places, and *correlational findings* on things that go together with more or less happiness. These findings are described on electronic *finding pages* in a standard format and terminology, each with a unique Internet address. An example of a finding page is presented in Figure 23.1. Finding pages are sorted by subject in *collections*. For this study we use the collections of correlational findings on happiness and local nature and time spent in nature. This technique is described in more detail in Veenhoven et al. (2022).

At 1 June 2020, the World Database of Happiness held seventeen empirical studies in which a relation between happiness and urban green was assessed. These studies are listed in Table 23.1. Together, these studies yielded thirty-eight correlational findings which are presented in Table 23.2. These studies were published between 2004 and 2018. Data was gathered in the following countries: New Zealand, Austria, the United Kingdom, Japan, the Netherlands, Uruguay, Germany, Finland, Hungary, Italy and China. Together, the seventeen studies cover the responses of 126,321 people.

**Table 23.1** Studies in which the relationship between urban green and happiness was examined.

Source	N; people; place; date	Measure(s) of urban green	Measure(s) of happiness: Question on
Ambrey, 2016	6,082; Australia; 2013	Greenspace, including cemeteries and sports fields	Life satisfaction
Ambrey et al., 2014	15,118; New Zealand; 2008 and 2010	Perceived access to greenspace	Life-satisfaction
Aussen et al., 2008	4,420; Netherlands; 2007–2008	Perceived nature facilities	Happiness
Ferre, 2008	801; Uruguay; 2007–2008	Perceived access to nature	Happiness
Fleming et al., 2016	22,727; New Zealand; 2008–2012	Perceived access to nature	Life satisfaction
Hermans et al., 2019	?? Office workers; the Netherlands	Plants placed in office (vs not)	Affect balance
Mollenkopf et al., 2004	2,432; elderly; the Netherlands, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Finland; 2000	Perceived access to greenery	Life satisfaction
Sabatini, 2011	4,130; Italy; 2008	Public parks and gardens as a percentage of the regional surface	Happiness
Smyth et al., 2008	8,890; China; 2003	Green area per capita in city	Life satisfaction
Tsurumi & Managi, 2015	2,158; Japan; 2012	Distance to greenspaces from home	Happiness
Tsurumi et al., 2018	2,758; Japan; 2014	Distance to greenspaces from home	Affect Balance Contentment Life satisfaction
Ward et al., 2016	108; New Zealand; 2014	Time in greenspace as % of total time	Happiness
White et al., 2013	10,000; United Kingdom; 1991–2008	Greenspace as % of local area	Life satisfaction

Source: [https://worlddatabaseofhappiness-archive.eur.nl/hap\\_cor/desc\\_sub.php?sid=5765](https://worlddatabaseofhappiness-archive.eur.nl/hap_cor/desc_sub.php?sid=5765).

**Table 23.2** Overview of observed correlations between urban green and happiness: direction and significance.

Aspects of urban green	Research methods					
	Cross-sectional		Longitudinal		Experimental	
	Zero-order	Partial	Zero-order	Partial	Zero-order	Partial
<b>Outdoor green</b>						
<i>Presence of green</i>						
Greenspace		<b>++</b>		<b>+</b>		
Access to green		<b>+</b>				
Proximity to green						
0–100		<b>+/+</b>				
100–500		<b>+/+</b>				
500–1,000		<b>+/+</b>				
1,000–1,500		<b>+/+</b>				
0–100		-				
100–300		<b>+</b>				
300–500		<b>+</b>				
500–1,000		<b>+</b>				
1,000–1,500		<b>+</b>				
1,500–2,000		<b>+</b>				
Number of green facilities	<b>+</b>	<b>+ 0 0</b>	<b>0 0</b>	<b>0 0</b>		
<i>Kind of green</i>						
Trees in block		-				
Water surface		<b>+</b>				
Parks		<b>++</b>				
<i>Use of greenery</i>						
Visits to green spots	<b>+</b>	<b>+</b>				
Time spent in green		<b>+/+</b>				
<b>Indoor green</b>						
Plants in office						<b>0</b>

+ = Positive correlation, significant (bold print)

+ = Positive correlation, not significant

0 = No correlation or direction not reported and not significant

- = Negative correlation, not significant

- = Negative correlation, significant (bold print)

-/+ = Positive and negative correlations with different sets of control variables

Measure of urban green: objective (not assessed by respondent), subjective (self-report of access)

Source: [https://worlddatabaseofhappiness-archive.eur.nl/hap\\_cor/desc\\_sub.php?sid=7544](https://worlddatabaseofhappiness-archive.eur.nl/hap_cor/desc_sub.php?sid=7544).

### Presentation of findings

The use of an online finding archive allows for a new way of presenting research findings in a review paper. Since this presentation will be unusual for most readers, the following explanation will be helpful. Each of the thirty-eight research findings is described in detail in the World Database of Happiness on a finding page with a unique Internet address. In our presentation of these findings in [Table 23.2](#) we simply use a sign that denotes the observed direction of correlation (-/0/+), with each sign hyperlinked to an online finding page. This allows a condensed presentation of the main trend in the findings, while providing the reader with access to the full details. Unlike traditional review papers, we need not describe all the findings in this text and bypass the problem that page limitation typically does not allow them to be provided in sufficient detail. This technique works only for electronic texts. In [Table 23.2](#) we coloured findings obtained with an objective measure of urban happiness red and finding obtained with a subjective measure blue. In [Table 23.2](#), we present the observed direction of correlation using (+) and (-) signs. Statistical significance is indicated in bold. In [Table 23.3](#) we present the twenty-one findings that were expressed with a comparable effect size, in this case a standardised regression coefficient with a theoretical range between -1 and +1.

In [Tables 23.2](#) and [23.3](#), we present the observed correlations by research method used. We distinguish between (a) *cross-sectional* studies which assess same-time correlation, (b) *longitudinal* studies which assess over-time correlation and (c) *experimental* studies which assess over-time change in happiness after induced change in contact with urban green. For each of these research methods, we distinguish between (1) 'raw' *zero-order* correlations and (2) *partial* correlations, in which the effect of possible intervening variables is filtered away. Such control procedures are meant to weed out spurious correlation but can also remove mediating effects and as such throw the baby away with the bathwater.

### Results

We will now answer the research questions mentioned earlier. **Does urban greenery add to happiness?** In [Table 23.2](#), we see mainly + signs, which means that more contact with urban green tends to go with greater happiness. This holds for 'greenspace', 'access to green', 'proximity to green', 'closeness to green', 'parks', 'time spent in green'. Note that about half (seventeen) of the thirty-eight correlations are statistically significant. All the significant correlations are obtained with objective measures of urban green and are marked red. **If so, how much?** Of the thirty-eight studies in [Table 23.2](#),

only twenty-one express this correlation in a comparable effect size, mostly standardised regression coefficients. These effect sizes are reported in Table 23.3. The correlations with objective measures of contact with urban green are quite small. The only sizeable correlation is with self-reported time spent in nature and may say more about leisure preference than about benefits of contact with urban green.

**Is the effect of urban green on happiness similar for everybody? If not, what kind of people benefit from urban green and what kind of people do not?** As yet, only two differentiating personal characteristics have been considered. The studies by Ambrey et al. (2014) and Fleming et al. (2016) in Australia and New Zealand observed a negative correlation with closeness to urban green among urbanites who fear crime and therefore see parks as unsafe places. The study by Tsurumi and Managi (2015) in Japan found that people with a greater 'affection for greenery' benefit more from greenspaces than those without such preference. **What sort of greenery will add most to happiness?** In Table 23.2 we can see that three kinds of urban green have been considered, of which only one (parks) correlated significantly with happiness. Table 23.3 provides no further information about relative addition to happiness. There is more data on *closeness to urban green*. The coefficients in Table 23.3 do not support the intuition that the effect of urban green will be greater the smaller the distance from one's home, but reveal a slightly stronger correlation with urban green at distances of 100m to 1,000m from home.

The discussion so far has been about *outdoor green*. At the bottom of Table 23.2 the reader can also see a study on the relation between *indoor green* and happiness. This experimental study is strong in design but met several practical problems which resulted in the loss of most participants and consequently in statistical insignificance of observed changes in happiness. **Does urban greenery relate more to the affective component of happiness than to the cognitive component?** The study on distance to urban green by Tsurumi et al. (2018) used three measures of happiness, covering overall happiness and its two components. The affective component was measured using a balance score of positive and negative affects experienced the previous day. The cognitive component was measured using the Cantril (1965) Ladder of Life question on which people rate their present life on a ladder scale ranging from the 'best possible' to the 'worst possible' life (Glatzer & Gulyas, 2014). In Table 23.3 we can see that closeness to urban green correlates significantly with how well one feels affectively (coloured red), but not with how close to the ideal life one thinks they are (coloured blue). This difference is in line with the biophilia theory.

**Table 23.3** Overview of observed correlations between urban green and happiness: effect sizes in.

Aspects of urban green	Research methods					
	Cross-sectional		Longitudinal		Experimental	
	Zero-order r	Partial rpc or Beta	Zero-order	Partial Beta	Zero-order	Partial
<b>Outdoor green</b>						
<i>Presence of green</i>						
Greenspace					+0.03	
Access to green						
Proximity to green in meters						
0–100		+0.02/+0.00/+0.01				
100–500		+0.04/+0.00/+0.00				
500–1,000		+0.04/+0.00/+0.01				
1,000–1,500		+0.03/+0.00/+0.00				
0–100		–0.02				
100–300		+0.01				
300–500		+0.13				
500–1,000		+0.06				
1,000–1,500		+0.01				
1,500–2,000		±.??				
Number of green facilities	+0.01	+0.01				
<i>Kind of green</i>						
Trees in block						
Water surface		+0.01				
Parks						
<i>Use of greenery</i>						
Visits to green spots	+0.01	+0.01				
Time spent in green		+0.44/+0.36				
<b>Indoor green</b>						
Plants in office						0



## Discussion and conclusion

The available research shows small positive correlations between greenery in urban areas and the happiness of people who live there. It is not clear to what extent this correlation results from an effect of contact with green on happiness or from an effect of happiness on choice for a greener environment. The observed support for the biophilia theory implies that there is at least some effect of greenery on happiness. Possibly, the real-life effects of urban green are stronger than the observed correlation coefficients suggest. Correlations are diluted in several ways, such as by measurement error. It is a task for future research to consider that problem.

A possible objection to the observed correlations could be that they stem from a tendency of happy people to see more greenery in their environment, while unhappy people perceive less green in the same environment, especially when seeking external causes for their misery. In this context it is worth noting that most of the correlations are obtained with objective measures of urban green, such as the percent of green surface in the respondent's neighbourhood. Anyway, the few subjective measures of urban green show no relation with happiness.

The available data provides little answer to the question of what kind of people benefit more or less from urban green happiness-wise: e.g. children or elderly? As yet, we also do not know what kind of outdoor urban green adds most to happiness, for instance private gardens, public parks, concentrated green in parks or dispersed in streets, trees or grasslands etc. Answers to these questions are essential for effective greening policy.

The evidence base is small as yet and smaller than one might expect given the political prominence of the issue and the interest of the greenery sector. Most of the thirteen studies reviewed in this chapter are from recent dates and that promises more studies in the near future. The format used in this chapter can then be used for periodic updates. To date (June 2021) there is not much empirical research on the relationship between urban green and the happiness of urbanites. The few available findings suggest a small positive effect but leave us largely in the blind about causality, mediators and moderators.

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## Conclusions: what have we learned about rural quality of life and how do we proceed?

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### Introduction

In this concluding chapter we (1) summarise the findings from every chapter in the book; (2) draw conclusions and wider implications on each of the four main themes; and (3) point out possible directions for future research on rural quality of life. To provide an initial overview, [Figure 24.1](#) summarises the themes covered in each part of the book (within the circles), and the cross-cutting themes that emerge among them (between the circles). Before going through the four parts, we want to open by offering a few reflections on these cross-cutting themes: spatial justice, meeting places and rural sociality.

Spatial justice emerged as common concern for authors in parts I and II in particular, but it is worth keeping the theme in mind when considering findings from parts III and IV as well. The most immediate manifestation of spatial injustice was connected to the phenomenon of rural gentrification, but the theme also cropped up in other ways. In the broadest sense, it has to do with difficult questions emerging about whose quality of life we are talking about, especially in situations where critical scrutiny reveals one group may derive their happiness from actively or passively, wittingly or unwittingly, excluding other groups. But spatial justice is also in play when we discover how urbanisation is not always just about urban sprawl and densification of the built environment, but may also entail a subtle colonisation of rurality by urban ideas and lifestyles. The collective message from authors dealing with these difficult issues is that at the very least we cannot afford to ignore and overlook these complexities if we are to properly understand rural quality of life. In this regard, more work is needed to connect quality of life studies with scholarship on social and spatial justice (see, for instance, Fraser, 2009; Soja, 2010; Fisker et al., 2022).

Meeting places emerged in particular between the perspectives on built environment in Part II and the focus on civil society in Part III. Unsurprisingly, there is broad agreement that meeting places are important for rural quality

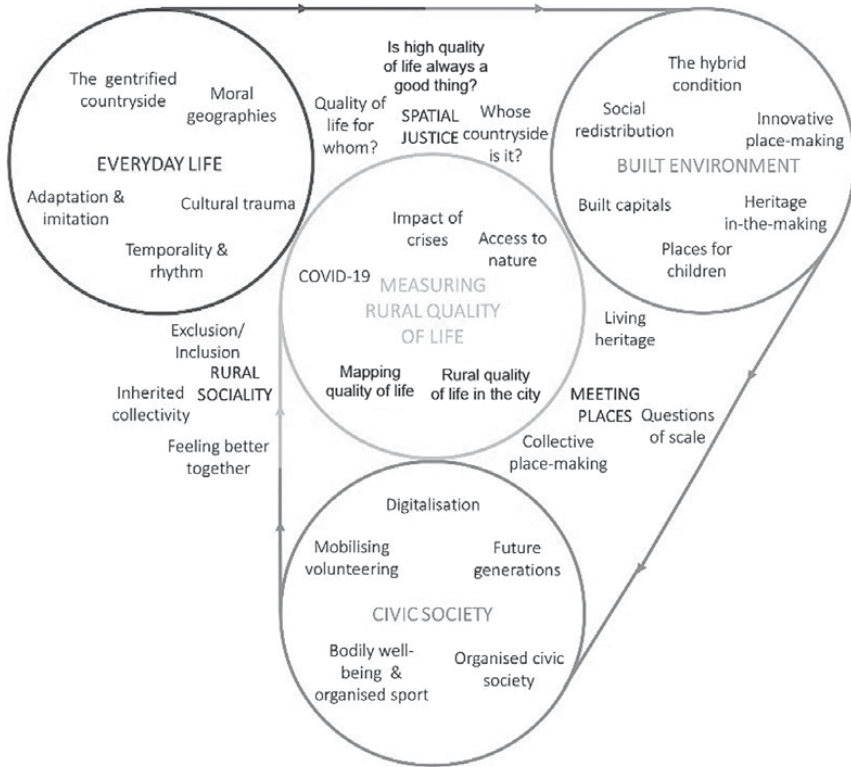


Figure 24.1 Summary of themes and findings within and between parts.

of life. When reading across the chapters, however, it quickly becomes clear that meeting places may be a lot of different things and that they are not confined to only being concrete physical sites. It also becomes clear that the meetings, or encounters, taking place at meeting places can be very different and that the question is more about who meets where, why and for what. It may therefore be useful to begin distinguishing between places where humans meet nature, places where people of different backgrounds meet across various axes of difference (class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.), places where locals meet visitors or newcomers and so forth.

This points towards the even broader common theme of rural sociality. The fact that most attempts to measure quality of life are conducted at the individual level sometimes distracts from the reality that rural quality of life is all about the social relations that define and condition the everyday life context for every individual. Some emotional states are inextricable from the social and cannot really be understood at the level of individuals, even if this is indeed the point at which we have the best opportunity to measure.

### Everyday life

Michael Carolan opened the part on everyday life by asking whether finding that rural quality of life is high in a specific community should always be regarded as a good thing. Based on fieldwork in rural Colorado he made the case that quality of life for one group is sometimes premised on the misery or exclusion of another. He attributed this to moral geographies and racial politics by pointing out the need for having discursive, practical and intellectual tools for talking about difference, and being able to practice rural policy which will not harm others' quality of life. Carolan concludes that a higher level of quality of life is not always to be favoured. Rather, a high level of quality of life may in some contexts and in some communities be a warning about social exclusion and suppressing of others' quality of life.

Pia Heike Johansen and Jens Kaae Fisker explored quality of life in rural Denmark through the lens of Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis with a view to complementing Hartmut Rosa's sociology of the good life. They direct attention to the risk that the construction of rural quality of life is just another coping strategy for being able to deal with all the human, social and environmental problems created by a society based on social acceleration. Everyday rural life is deeply integrated in social acceleration; living in the countryside, then, is not an effective means of escape. However, where resonance was identified, it was associated with rhythmic aspects of life in the countryside and not with rural life, concluding that those rhythms cannot be linked to specific activities, gender, class, age, or predefined lifestyles.

Martin Phillips, Darren Smith, Hannah Brooking and Mara Duer continued the thread opened in the previous chapter about going beyond the rural idyll. Their chapter focused on the gentrified countryside and the lack of overview on how quality of life goes into that. Their review outlined six approaches to well-being and pointed out the impact on findings when it came to constructions of rurality, temporal changes in well-being and the atmospheres of particular locations.

Simona Zollet and Meng Qu adopted a specific focus on lifestyle migrants moving from the city to the remote countryside, in their case small Japanese islands. They found that lifestyle migrants may adapt to 'inconvenient' ways of life, but they also raise doubt whether the lifestyle migrants in the long run will be able to deal with the lower level of services and infrastructure. Zollet and Qu found that a desired rural lifestyle, including a better work-life balance constructed in an urban setting, may lead to more work through a creation of a suitable mix of activities that bring in-migrants as close as possible to their desired lifestyles. They point out that for lifestyle migrants driven by a desire for autonomy, self-sufficiency and simpler, downsized lifestyles, rural communities can become spaces of experimentation for new modes and ways of living. Zollet and Qu conclude that desired lifestyles

and expectations of quality of life highly depend on the extent to which in-migrants can construct lifestyles that go radically against expected local conventions, without putting aside the social interaction, relations and networks with the locals.

Finally, Maria Christina Crouch and Jordan P. Lewis explored what rural quality of life means among Alaska Native groups. Their study found that through the process of colonisation there has been a disruption in the natural order of life and a persistent push to modernise and move from traditional rural life. They conclude that Alaska Native people's strong connection to their land gives them an identity spirit and quality of life that makes them resilient to the rapid sociocultural changes in rural Alaska. Like the other authors in this section, Crouch and Lewis argue for the need of holistic frameworks for understanding the meaning and embeddedness of quality of life for different groups of people.

### The built environment

Mark Scott set out to scrutinise the prioritisation of human well-being and quality of life in rural planning. Findings from a range of European cases led him to request a broader place-sensitive perspective that takes into account a holistic range of rural 'capitals'. He argued for a more empowering process to explore how rural communities themselves can mobilise place-based capitals to shape future conditions for well-being. Scott concluded by suggesting a framework for future planning so that it can play an *enabling* role in the process of clarifying the interrelationships, the potential for 'conversion' of one form of capital to other capitals, for intergenerational sustainability and well-being.

Anne Tietjen and Gertrud Jørgensen systematically investigated place-based participatory projects in Denmark which had been conducted with a view to enhancing quality of life in rural areas affected by population loss. They found that Danish rural communities are competent and energetic, reaching out to wider society in relational built structures when building places for better quality of life and especially community well-being. The locals know about the qualities they want to nurture in their built environments when it comes to cultural heritage, landscape and nature. Importantly, Tietjen and Jørgensen make clear that locals work to find place-based solutions to problems caused by general urban-rural development and centralisation policies. While national Danish rural policy shows little efficiency, these community-driven projects are an important local development tool.

Juanee Cilliers and Menini Gibbens addressed a very different setting in rural South Africa, where a general lack of basic infrastructure meant that the creation of spaces conducive to children's well-being were often

being neglected. Their investigation of child-friendly spaces showed that such spaces should be valued for the social, environmental and economic benefits that they provide to communities. Especially in the African context, this value is important. They also reached the conclusion that there is a need for rural policies to support community-led creation of child-friendly places. On the academic side, Cilliers and Gibbens found a need for a deeper understanding in the planning literature of the meaning of child-friendly places in an African context. Finally, they argued that safety and free access to activities are fundamental for child-friendly places, for the rural community as well as for the children.

Meiqin Wang explored what may happen when art is used as the medium for interventions in the built environment of rural places in China. Based on her case study of Longtan village, she concluded that the intervention had, on one hand, improved the visibility of local heritage in the village, and on the other hand, mobilised cultural heritage as a vehicle for community and personal development characterised by a focus on the past in the present. This, she argued, may allow villagers to take an active role in making better futures through creative engagement in arts and placemaking. But Wang also warns that long-term sustainability of the interventions should not be taken for granted.

Nick Gallent took up the topic of rural gentrification from a different perspective by focusing on the relations between affordable housing and quality of life in the English countryside. His study showed very clearly that having the opportunity to buy or rent an affordable house is central for well-being – both for individuals and for rural communities. The vitality of rural communities depends on this and where available it ensures that they do not become exclusive enclaves, thereby losing much of their capacity to respond to the challenges that rural areas will face in the future. Gallent also found that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed housing inequalities across Europe and North America. In these parts of the world, wealthier urban households escaped to the countryside. Relatedly, he warned that some rural areas may be swallowed by a counter-urbanisation pressure undermining the rights of existing residents and that planning systems and land policies need to flex to cope with these new challenges. The future of rural communities depends on the capacities and innovation that are rooted in social diversity. New exclusions risk undermining social diversity, which in turn creates not only new socio-spatial injustices but also dangers for the broader well-being and resilience of rural communities. Therefore, Gallent concluded that planning and market rationing need to prioritise access to affordable housing, since this is a prerequisite for social diversity.

Nils Björling departed from the focus on present and future to address the historical development of the Swedish welfare state and its implications for rural quality of life. His analysis showed how this long historical process led



to a geographical polarisation between urban and rural. This polarisation, he concluded, has led to the production of a 'rurban void' which has come to define everyday life in vast stretches of the country. Against this tendency, Björling made the case for new planning sensibilities and alternative planning practices emerging in the rurban void which embrace the notion of a right to spatial production, especially for actors who are usually missing or not able to participate on equal terms in the planning process. In the Swedish case, the current articulation of inequality and polarisation in public debate may constitute a window of opportunity for moving in this direction. For Björling, this involves nothing less than the creation of a new social contract involving recognition of difference as a value to be safeguarded.

### Civil society

Evald Bundgård Iversen, Michael Fehsenfeld and Bjarne Ibsen consider how inhabitants in three Danish rural areas assess whether, how and why participation influences their quality of life. Using a qualitative methodology, they find three overarching themes which highlight how participation in civil society in different ways positively influences individuals' quality of life. The first theme indicates that it is rewarding for individuals to contribute to creating activities for others so that it is also possible to have a diverse leisure life in a rural setting. The second theme highlights how it is rewarding to contribute to civil society. The third and final theme highlights how it is experienced as rewarding to be a part of the 'struggle' which makes it possible to continue to operate a civil society in rural areas despite 'the rural exodus'. These three themes sum up different aspects of participating and contributing to civil society which arguably contributes to higher levels of quality of life in rural areas.

Next, Anders Melås, Maja Farstad and Sein Frisvoll shed light on rural youth – their quality of life, civil participation and outlook for a possible future for youth in rural areas. Using mixed methods, they show how two different aspects are important to understand what characterises rural youth's participation in different rural contexts. First, they show how sociality is different among rural youth in comparison to their counterparts in larger cities, with rural youth participating in civil society activities to a higher extent, and how this indicates that rural communities stimulate rural youth's participation in both organised and unorganised civil society. Second, they show how rural youth have a significant duality and ambivalence in their presentation of the rural as being both peaceful and safe, while also boring and limiting for their aspirations. Finally, the authors suggest a socio-spatial approach to understanding how to improve quality of life

in rural areas. According to this approach, future policy should focus less on keeping up a given population and instead focus more on how a socio-spatial approach could have a wider impact on which social and spatial circumstances might matter for the quality of life in rural areas.

The third contribution in this section is written by David Beel and Claire Wallace, who investigate how cultural heritage might mobilise local civil society and add to the quality of life in rural areas in the Orkney Islands. They argue that cultural and social capital can be a focus of civil society and the civil organisations in relation to this can circulate different forms of capital. Using a qualitative methodology, they show how local historical associations have helped generate local capital within their localities and across the islands. Digitalisation of the material collected by the local historical associations produced both advantages and threats. The advantages include creating world-wide interest and attracting more visitors which benefits the local economy, the threat being a loss of control by local associations and creating a demand that the local associations had difficulties in meeting. By creating social and cultural capital locally, local control of the cultural transmission through technology links the past with the future and thereby helps to empower civil society and thus benefit rural quality of life.

Fourth, Kjersti Tandberg and Jill Loga explore how the organisation of 'volunteering neighbourhood mothers' operating in a rural area might contribute to voluntarism, inclusion and quality of life in Norway. Using a qualitative methodology, they show how marginalised women with low language skills are included in a civil society organisation and how this participation might influence their well-being. Tandberg and Loga find that inclusion in a voluntary organisation has a huge impact on ethnic women's experienced well-being and quality of life in rural areas. In rural areas there are fewer and more often membership-based organisations, which makes it harder to find a relevant organisation, particularly for immigrant women, as there are fewer organisations with an immediate profile relevant for them. Further, voluntary organisations are important arenas for individuals' well-being, but also for their possibilities to get a job as it is often through the networks in such associations that the possibility to get a job is achieved. Being a member creates a social belonging which is a primary motive for becoming a member. In sum, Tandberg and Loga find that the voluntary organisations seem to be a more important arena for inclusion in rural areas than in cities.

Rochelle Eime, Jack Harvey, Melanie Charity and Hans Westerbeek ended this section with a comparison of health-related quality of life in rural/regional areas and metropolitan areas of Australia. Their quantitative study based on survey data showed that the only consistent difference between rural/regional areas and metropolitan areas was that those in metropolitan

areas reported better physical health than those in rural and regional areas. Highest levels of mental health and well-being were found among metropolitan males and rural and regional females and lowest among metropolitan females. The highest level of life satisfaction was reported by rural and regional adults and lowest by rural and regional adolescents.

### Measuring rural quality of life

Henrik Lolle investigates the case of Denmark, a geographically small, universal welfare state. He expects only minor differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas, and if any significant difference exists, he expects that Denmark will follow the recent trend in the global North more generally, with rural areas in the lead. Lolle uses person-level, register panel data merged with survey data from thirty-eight municipalities to analyse differences in subjective well-being between urban and rural areas by way of multilevel regression analyses. The survey data includes several different domain satisfaction measures as well as different subjective well-being dimensions. The main results are that there are only minor differences in the level of subjective well-being between municipalities in Denmark. However, on average, rural municipalities have higher subjective well-being than do urban municipalities. Overall, compositional effects from age, marital status, income etc. cannot explain this difference. However, a large part of the difference is mediated through a lower level of feeling of stress in rural municipalities and a higher level of feeling meaning in life. In general, these findings apply not only to life satisfaction, but also to other dimensions of subjective well-being and to a series of domain satisfaction measures, for instance everyday life and family life. Lolle also explores rural–urban migration and subjective well-being, and the general pattern here is very small and insignificant effects on well-being from migration.

Federica Viganò, Enzo Grossi and Giorgio Tavano Blessi investigated how the relationship between an urban–rural continuum and subjective well-being has changed in Italy from 2008 to 2018. Their point of departure was a survey from 2008 where the results supported the more general findings from later research, namely that the level of subjective well-being is significantly higher in rural areas. The purpose of the chapter was primarily to investigate whether this trend towards higher levels of subjective well-being in rural areas has continued in Italy. The secondary purpose was to explore which factors have an impact on subjective well-being, whether different factors are relevant in rural vis-à-vis urban areas, and if this has changed over the decade from 2008 to 2018. The impact factors under consideration were a series of background factors, four constructed scales for

cultural activities, health, social activities and participation, and finally participation in physical exercise activities. Somewhat surprisingly, the trend has seemingly turned around in Italy, with levels of subjective well-being now being higher in the larger cities than in rural areas. Additionally, the authors found that a few impact factors have changed character markedly in the interim period.

Continuing on the same topic of changes in subjective well-being over time, Marta Pasqualini's analyses from France also focused on in-depth investigations of subjective well-being along a rural–urban continuum. But whereas Viganò et al. looked at changes over a decade, Pasqualini explored changes from immediately before and through the COVID-19 pandemic, using nine measuring points spread across the period. She concluded that being locked down was more stressful in the largest cities and that in the first phase of lockdown subjective well-being was higher in rural areas and smaller towns. But she also found that this general finding covered up a more diverse pattern with internal variations in both urban and rural areas.

Rolf Lyneborg Lund opened his chapter by stating that since the early Chicago School, scholars have done neighbourhood studies, and these have been on the rise in recent years. A prime hypothesis in neighbourhood studies is that this local setting, the neighbourhood, influences the people living there, for instance people's happiness. However, as Lund continues, it is strange then that nearly nobody seems to be interested in defining the neighbourhood. The borders are blurry, and it is hard to get measures that in some consistent way can describe such neighbourhoods. In quantitative studies, you can define borders of official local administrative units like a region, a municipality, or a city, and you can often find lots of figures describing these units: by mean income, rate of unemployment, percentage of people living in single-family houses, Gini-coefficient etc. However, often it is the fuzzy neighbourhoods, and not the official geographical units, that affect people's lives. Lund has developed a new method, based on geographical grid-data to map neighbourhoods. With this method, it is possible to 'catch' homogeneous neighbourhoods much more in sync with reality so to speak, much more than is the case with administrative units or just some squares on a map. In the chapter, Lund shows how he, with Denmark as a case, can use his method for analysing individual-level register data as well as such register data in combination with survey data. With his flexible mapping method, Lund shows how the estimated neighbourhoods can better differentiate average scores on, for instance, deprivation. He shows, among other things, how a rural municipality consists of very different neighbourhoods. The survey data is scarce in comparison with the register data, and it is not possible to get valid measures of single neighbourhoods. However, by pooling together neighbourhoods that are alike in terms of certain individual-level,

register-based measures, he can still use this mapping method to analyse the survey data. He shows examples of this on measures of subjective well-being.

In the chapter by Kathryn Colley, Margaret Currie and Katherine Irvine, the authors performed primary and secondary analyses to critically examine the value of outdoor recreation for the well-being of rural residents. Initially, the authors found statistically significant effects from outdoor recreation on subjective well-being. However, use of outdoor recreation can only explain a minor part of the higher average level of well-being in rural areas. The primary focus for the authors was on exploring the inequalities in the use of outdoor recreation in rural areas. Among other things, the empirical results showed a polarisation in outdoor recreation participation in remote areas which is not seen in more accessible rural areas. The authors also discussed future outdoor recreation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and asked if the pandemic might act as a moment of change and reshaping habits. This discussion should be read with Pasqualini's findings in mind.

Ruut Veenhoven, Nivré Claire Wagner and Jan Ott introduce the reader to the biophilia theory and to the furthering of urban green. As such, the chapter turns the primary focus of the book away from the rural to the incorporation of rural elements in urban environments. The main research question is whether urban green has a positive effect on happiness. The authors also present a new method for doing synthesis analysis, collecting results from existing research on the correlation between happiness and urban green from the World Database of Happiness. They use results from seventeen empirical studies between 2004 and 2018 from eleven different countries around the world. Their synthesis analysis shows only small positive correlations between greenery in urban areas and the happiness of people who live there. However, as the authors write in conclusion, the findings 'leave us largely in the blind about causality, mediators and moderators'.

### **What did we learn and what is next for the study of rural quality of life?**

On the topic of **everyday life** we learned that what rural quality of life is and what it can be is contingent not just on who experiences it but also the situations that they find themselves in while doing so. Importantly, we also learned that while quality of life is certainly not a zero-sum game, there are dynamics at play in which the happiness of one community or group may sometimes come about at the cost of misery for another. This is exceedingly important for policymakers to recognise and to address in policy-making, especially as well-being becomes an increasingly central policy objective.

Regarding the **built environment**, we are now better placed to embark upon those necessary collective journeys towards places that are truly conducive to human (and non-human) flourishing. Keeping the lessons from above in mind, now is the time to begin specifying how rural planning may make good on the promise to prioritise quality of life before and above other policy targets. The arguments for doing so are there and possible ways forward are taking shape. What should be drawn from this book is the lesson that if rural planning is to succeed in this endeavour, it needs to find ways of recognising, respecting, safeguarding and nurturing *difference*.

That **civil society** is important for rural quality of life was never really in question, but the simplistic notion that a strong civil society leads to higher levels of well-being does not really say all that much. The explorations in this book have opened this black box. As is often the case when opening black boxes, the result is not clarity but neither is it complete confusion. Rather, what we are left with is an enlightening enrichment and a wealth of challenging questions for future work, especially across the blurry boundaries between organised and unorganised civil society. What future research should ask is not so much which of the two is most responsible for creating rural quality of life, but rather how they create it together. What, in other words, is the ‘right amount’ of organisation in rural communities if what we aim for is to enhance quality of life.

**Measuring quality of life** is as difficult as ever and the jury is still out on the rural–urban happiness paradox. Our mission, however, was not to decide on a winner but rather to provide a way forward where insights from both sides of the debate are allowed to inform our views. Our empirical investigations have provided important new evidence but also suggest new methods, not just for measuring but also for mapping quality of life. The latter is of particular importance if future research is to break new ground regarding the intricate patterns emerging along the rural–urban continuum.

There are, however, also important topics that the book has not covered. In rounding off, we feel obliged to mention two of these and to direct attention towards the important work being done on them beyond our own circle of contributors. Our most serious omission is the intersection between rural quality of life, gender and sexuality. The work and discussions included on spatial justice, post-coloniality and moral geographies could have been further enriched by more overt encounters with similar challenges facing sexual minorities and justice issues related to gender (see for instance Liliequist, 2020; Lundgren & Johansson, 2017). The other omission was premised by our entry point: the rural–urban happiness paradox. In previous work, this phenomenon has been observed precisely in countries usually considered part of the global North. Our decision was therefore to focus mostly on these countries. But the topic of rural quality of life is of course equally

important elsewhere, and it would be highly relevant to follow up our work by collecting contributions from authors working with a much more diverse set of empirical cases.

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