



The influence of symbolic and emotional meanings of rural facilities on reactions to closure: The case of the village supermarket



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ABSTRACT

In depopulating rural areas, one of the main issues is how to deal with the decline of local facilities such as schools, post-offices and shops. It is often feared that closure of a local facility will negatively affect the accessibility of that service and the liveability of the village. This paper examines how villagers experience the loss of a small local supermarket. Building on the concept of sense of place, we examine how people's attitude towards place-change relates to the functional, social, symbolic and emotional meanings a supermarket can have for individuals and for a community. A survey ($n = 312$) was conducted shortly before the closure of the supermarket in Ulrum, a depopulating village in the rural North of the Netherlands. The results show that negative evaluation of closure can be explained by individual emotional attachment to the supermarket and by the general symbolic value of a supermarket for a village. Contradictory to popular belief, perceptions of decreasing accessibility or diminishing liveability do not exemplify why many residents react negatively to the closure of the supermarket. In the Dutch rural context, access is only an issue for a relatively small group of people consisting mostly of elderly and less mobile citizens, while large groups of villagers may react negatively to closure of rural facilities. We propose that in different international contexts people may experience senses of loss and can react negatively to facility-decline due to the social, symbolic and emotional meaning of rural facilities.

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1. Introduction

In the age of globalisation and urbanisation, decreasing numbers of facilities in rural areas, such as schools, shops, post-offices, libraries and supermarkets, is a common source of concern (Paddison and Calderwood, 2007; Woods, 2005). In many countries facility-decline occurred predominantly in smaller villages due to economies of scale and increased levels of mobility (Paddison and Calderwood, 2007). In the Dutch context this has resulted in a loss of choice rather than significantly worsened accessibility, since the countryside is densely populated and has a well-developed road network (van Dam, 1995; Steenbekkers and Vermeij, 2013). We could therefore argue that, for most people in the Netherlands, access is not an issue. Nevertheless, rural facility-decline is still a major source of concern, and local media regularly report about closures and protests (Haartsen and Venhorst, 2010; Hospers, 2010). Although high levels of mobility counteract the effects of facility decline (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014), there are

studies showing that insufficient public transport in rural areas (Stockdale, 1993) or a lack of motorized transport could still cause problems with access to services (Higgs and White, 1997; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014). The decline of local facilities is also thought to affect the satisfaction of residents regarding their living environment, which is often referred to as the 'liveability' of a village (Gieling and Haartsen, 2016; Higgs and Langford, 2013). This suggests that there might be other factors apart from accessibility influencing local concern or protests when it comes to facility decline. A potential explanation is that change can be seen as a threat to rural character (Halfacree, 1995; Tilt et al., 2007; Woods, 2003), and rural facilities can have a social and symbolic meaning for a community (Amcoff et al., 2011; Cabras and Bosworth, 2014; Kearns et al., 2009; Svendsen, 2013). People may also feel emotionally attached to local facilities and closure can cause a 'sense of loss' (Devine-Wright, 2009; Fried, 2000). These added meanings of facilities are rarely taken into account in empirical research on rural facility decline. What is missing, both in lay and in academic discourse, is a conclusive argument as to why people have negative reactions when a local facility disappears, and what factors play a part. The relatively good accessibility of rural facilities

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and services, makes the Netherlands an interesting case to investigate what other factors might influence reactions to closure of rural facilities. This paper investigates how villagers react to the loss of a local supermarket, and how this is influenced by the emotional, functional, social and symbolic meanings of this facility. We investigate the closure of a supermarket in Ulrum, a village facing population decline in the rural North of the Netherlands. In the spring of 2015 a survey was conducted ($n = 312$) to examine reactions to closure of the local supermarket, which is comparable to a small grocery store. To question the different meanings the supermarket had for people and the community we used the concept of sense of place and its three dimensions: place attachment, place dependence and place identity.

The outline of the paper is as follows: In the theory-section we present an overview of the theoretical concepts and previous research that could be used to explain reactions to closure of local facilities. This is followed by a description of the case study, data collection and methodology. The results are presented in two sections. The first section describes how people evaluated and reacted to the closure of the supermarket. The different groups that experienced closure as negative, and those who indicated to be dependent on the supermarket for groceries are examined. In the second section we examine what meanings the supermarket had for respondents and what factors are significant for negative evaluation of closure. In the conclusion we discuss the findings and link these to the current debate on facility decline.

2. Theory

2.1. Consequences of rural facility decline

To be able to investigate negative reactions to closure we need to look at the negative consequences of rural facility decline. International research often focuses on accessibility of facilities such as schools (Talen, 2001), hospitals (Henderson and Taylor, 2003) and supermarkets (O'Dwyer and Coveney, 2006; Smoyer-Tomic et al., 2006), because they offer basic services for education, healthcare and food supply that everybody needs (Farmer et al., 2012a). However, as argued in the introduction, accessibility of (rural) services is relatively good in the Netherlands. Basic facilities such as the general practitioner, primary school and supermarket are on average available at 1.5 km distance and almost never more than 10 km away (Steenbekkers and Vermeij, 2013; CBS). Nevertheless, access to services is not just about distance and distribution of facilities, but also about 'accessibility of transport' (Hine and Kamruzzaman, 2012). In the Netherlands 90–94% of rural households own a car (Steenbekkers and Vermeij, 2013), but there is a 'small' group of people that are less mobile and might have problems with access to basic facilities and services. Previous studies have argued that people with low mobility such as the elderly, low income groups or other people without motorized transport are more vulnerable to closure of local facilities (Higgs and Langford, 2013; Hine and Kamruzzaman, 2012; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Talen, 1998). Especially for this group the decline of local facilities combined with the decline of public transport services could be problematic (Stockdale, 1993). An inequitable distribution of rural facilities, that is not attuned to the needs of people with low mobility, could negatively affect a community's attitude towards facility decline.

Other negative consequences of facility decline that might influence how people perceive closures, include the possible effects on the village and the community. In media and public discourse, it is often suggested that the decline of local facilities negatively affects the satisfaction with the quality of the living environment, or the 'liveability' (Haartsen and Venhorst, 2010; Ruth and Franklin,

2014). However, recent studies imply that liveability is dependent on an array of local values in which the availability of facilities and services only plays a minor part (Gielsing and Haartsen, 2016; Perez et al., 2012). Moreover, villages without any facilities or services, can still be perceived as very liveable (Gardenier et al., 2011). The feared decline of liveability after closure of facilities may actually be more related to the social function that rural facilities can have for a community (Amcoff et al., 2011; Haartsen and Van Wissen, 2012; Kearns et al., 2009; Svendsen, 2013). In fact, public places that allow for informal social interaction, such as facilities, have been shown to be beneficial for the sense of belonging to a community or social cohesion (Mount and Cabras, 2015; Spaaij, 2009; Witten et al., 2001). The social function of rural facilities can be especially important for people with low mobility such as the elderly (Gardner, 2011; Rosenbaum, 2006). The increase of car-use in rural areas has facilitated people to maintain social networks further away, but people without a car are more dependent on local social networks and closure of local meeting places could lead to social isolation for this group (Gardner, 2011; Gray et al., 2006; Urry, 2002). However, even in cases where there are moderate negative consequences with regard to accessibility or liveability, the closure of rural facilities can be experienced as a 'disruption' of every-day live and lead to emotional responses and protests.

2.2. Reaction to closure of rural facilities: dealing with place change

Although there is little research about this in the context of facility-decline, negative reactions to place change could be caused by the disruption of emotional bonds between people and places, also known as 'place attachment' (Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). Brown and Perkins (1992) distinguish three phases in the disruption of place attachment: In the pre-disruption phase people learn about the upcoming developments and can have responses in anticipation of change, in the disruption phase the changes occur and in the post-disruption phase people oppose change or accept it. By using social representations theory Devine-Wright (2009), Devine-Wright and Clayton (2010) surpasses Brown and Perkins (1992) with five stages of psychological response to place change: becoming aware, interpreting, evaluating, coping and acting. The first two stages are about personal perception: become aware of upcoming or past place change and interpreting the implications. In the third stage people evaluate change as positive, neutral or negative. After this assessment people show coping responses such as denial, resignation or emotional reactions such as anger. People may even have feelings of grief upon loss of a place that is important to them (Fried, 2000; Morgan, 2010). In the final stage people show behavioural responses to resist change or accept it. Devine-Wright (2009) argues that local opposition to place change, such as petitions or protests, are forms of 'place protective action' that arise from the disruption of place attachment. However, recent studies have found that high positive place attachment does not directly predict place-protective behaviour, since subjective norms and perceived behavioural control were more influential (Anton and Lawrence, 2016; Vorkinn and Riese, 2001). Positive place attachment did predict negative evaluations of change. Furthermore, place-protective behaviour, which can also be investigated in light of geographies of protest (Woods, 2003), does not necessarily account for silent discontent. In this paper we are therefore interested in resident's evaluation of change (phase 3) which precedes reactions to the closure of a rural facility (phase 4). In the following paragraph we present a theoretical framework of how bonds between residents and facilities influence evaluations of place change.

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