



# The influence of village attractiveness on flows of movers in a declining rural region



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## 1. Introduction

The attractiveness of rural areas has often been described as the rural idyll. And indeed, research has shown that a desire for space, quiet, greenery, and safety can motivate people to move from urban to rural areas; a trend known as counterurbanisation (Champion, 1999; Boyle et al., 1998). Despite having these attractive features, rural regions around the world are seeing their populations decline because of trends such as continuing urbanisation and below-replacement levels of fertility. However, the extent to which people are leaving particular places can vary within generally depopulating regions. Indeed, villages that are growing or declining can be located right next to each other (Bontje and Musterd, 2012). However, the questions of how and why these differences between villages exist have hardly been studied.

The flows of movers to and from rural villages are unquestionably major causes of shifts in rural populations at the local level. Whereas flows into and out of rural areas have attracted much attention, research on people moving within rural regions is scarce. Milbourne (2007) found it “surprising that more has not been said about these more local migrations” (p. 385), because “different mobilities, present in different combinations in different places [...] produce the complexities of rural population change” (p.386). Especially in the context of population decline, these short-distance relocations can cause rural villages to thrive or shrivel demographically, because movers are likely to have more housing

options to choose from in declining regions than in growing regions.

The lack of attention given to moves within rural regions has also been noted by Stockdale (2016). She pointed out that “these shorter steps are rarely studied” (para. Conclusion), even though her research showed that 41% of changes of address in rural areas were undertaken from within rural areas. Furthermore, Van der Molen (1993) observed that although the majority of older people within the Netherlands move within the same municipality, research has often overlooked these intra-local moves. Similarly, other studies conducted in rural North-Netherlands have shown that most moves occur between rural municipalities, while the numbers of rural-urban, urban-rural, and inter-urban moves are smaller (Bijker et al., 2012); and that more than half of all movers either moved within their own village or moved within 10 km of their previous address (Elshof et al., 2014).

People move to places with characteristics that best suit their interests; i.e., that are most attractive. What is considered attractive depends on the characteristics of a place, but also on the people who evaluate these characteristics (e.g., Argent et al., 2007, 2014; Bijker et al., 2012; Stockdale and Catney, 2014). It is well known, for instance, that many young adults are attracted to cities that provide greater opportunities for education and employment (Champion, 1999); whereas somewhat older middle-class families are often attracted to aspects of the rural idyll, such as peace and quiet (Halfacree, 2008). Nonetheless, recent studies have shown that there is a wide range of motivations for people to migrate to rural areas (Grimsrud, 2011; Halfacree, 2008; Bijker et al., 2013).

Over the past few decades, the interest among scholars in the role of amenities in migration has been increasing (Niedomysl and Clark, 2014). Referring to population change in rural villages, Argent et al. (2009) argued: “the nature, direction, and regional manifestations of population change are strongly related to the varying levels of local amenity” (p.15). The natural qualities of the living environment have often been considered to be amenities that influence moving behaviour. Half-open landscapes (McGranahan, 2008; Bijker et al., 2012), nearby beaches (Argent et al., 2007; McGranahan, 1999), and other aspects of scenic beauty (Halfacree, 1995; Ulrich, 1986; Deller et al., 2001) have all been found to attract people. These characteristics are often associated

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with the rural idyll, as are social aspects such as friendly people, a less hurried lifestyle, and less crime (Gkartziou and Scott, 2009; Van Dam et al., 2002). However, characteristics that are less related to the rural idyll have also been shown to motivate moves to rural areas, such as cheap housing and proximity to family and friends (Bijker et al., 2012).

At the local level, it is likely that certain villages attract or repel people of different ages, because the needs of people change over the life course. For example, while some people are drawn to the remoteness of rural areas, others prefer to stay closer to metropolitan centres. Although the relationship between moving and age is well established, the geography of moving in this relationship is often ignored (Stockdale and Catney, 2014). It is therefore important that we gain more insight into the question of how attractive rural villages are for people of different ages.

In this paper, we investigate flows of movers of different age categories to rural villages in a declining region. Although we also analyse inward and outward flows, our focus is on net settlement (the difference between inward and outward flows) because given the general decline in the population, it is net settlement that determines (together with natural growth) whether a village population will grow, stabilise, or decline. In this paper, we aim to show that whether a rural village is considered attractive depends on more factors than those of the rural idyll, but that the extent to which this is the case differs over age. We begin our study by exploring patterns of net settlement by age category in rural villages in order to provide some initial insights into how people of different ages move within rural areas, and how the populations of villages are affected. We then analyse which village characteristics influence the net settlement rates among different age categories in rural villages in North-Netherlands.

We used a cluster analysis to investigate the net settlement patterns of rural villages in North-Netherlands among different age categories. Using linear regression, we analysed the influence of various village characteristics on inward and outward flows of movers of villages, and, consequently, on net settlement. We derived the data for the calculation of inward and outward flows and net settlement at the village level from the Dutch population register for the period 1995–2010. To get a more complete picture of which rural villages ‘win’ or ‘lose’ people, and of the reasons why, we included in our study both short-distance relocations and long-distance migration. The set of village characteristics that might account for the villages’ levels of attractiveness were provided by Statistics Netherlands, the Netherlands’ Cadastre Land Registry and Mapping Agency, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Heritage, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

## 2. The influence of attractiveness on flows of movers in rural villages

The enduring lure of cities is one of the causes of population decline in rural areas. In the Netherlands, as in many other post-industrialised countries, young adults contribute heavily to the depopulation of rural areas by migrating to urban areas in search of educational and employment opportunities (Haartsen and Venhorst, 2010; Thissen et al., 2010). Previously, this migration deficit was compensated for by high levels of fertility, but fertility levels in the Netherlands have been below replacement level for several decades (Statistics Netherlands, 2016). As in many other countries, some young adults return, but many of them stay in or close to the cities to ‘cash out’ their investments in education, only to return to the countryside in later life (Fielding, 1992), or not at all. In addition to these economic reasons, young people tend to move to the city because of its liveliness. “The city has more [...] ‘action’ [...] and, is to be preferred over the restricted and comparatively

uneventful life of the village” (Brandes, 2013).

Conversely, some people move from urban to rural areas. This process of counterurbanisation has been previously described as the influx of middle-class groups who are attracted by the rural idyll (Champion, 1999; Halfacree, 1995, 2008). It has been posited that while movers to urban areas are searching for liveliness, these rural movers are seeking peace and quiet. However, more recent research has pointed out that migration to rural areas is also driven by other motivations, and that other groups of people are moving to the country. For example, young adults may move to rural areas because they are attracted by cheap housing, or because they want to be close to family and friends (Bijker et al., 2013; Grimsrud, 2011; Haartsen and Thissen, 2014; Stockdale, 2006).

Moves within rural regions have received less attention from researchers than moves into and out of rural areas. Nonetheless, the importance of investigating these moves within rural regions has been highlighted by several researchers. Walford (2007) showed that in rural Wales, most people moved over short distances, and that certain places have enduring migration links. Stockdale (2016) encountered ‘messy’ in-migration processes in rural England, where counterurbanisation is still an important trend, but lateral rural, return, and retirement migration processes are also occurring. Another study by Bijker et al. (2012) made a distinction between popular and less popular rural areas in North-Netherlands based on housing value. They found that less popular areas have a higher influx of movers from other rural areas, whereas migration into popular areas is more indicative of the classical counterurbanisation trends among middle-class people who move from urban areas in search of the rural idyll. Research investigating the influence of village characteristics on the flows of movers at this low-scale level is nevertheless lacking.

It is generally expected that flows of movers into and out of rural villages will be influenced by the attractiveness of the village; i.e., that the influx of people will be higher and the outflow will be lower in villages that are considered to be more attractive. There is, however, no clear consensus on which features contribute to or detract from the attractiveness of a village. While all rural villages offer space and quiet, certain village characteristics may contribute more to the idyllic character of the village than others. Furthermore, as age and life course stage are important predictors of personal preferences and of moving behaviour (e.g., Rossi, 1955; Courgeau, 1985; Stockdale and Catney, 2014), these characteristics should be taken into account in discussions on how amenities and the flows of movers are related.

### 2.1. The amenity of scenic beauty and flows of movers

The term ‘amenities’ refers to the features that enhance the quality of a living environment. Partridge (2010) defined amenities as: “simply anything that shifts the household willingness to locate in a particular location. By definition, they are broadly defined and include weather, landscape, public services, public infrastructure, crime, ambience, and so on ...” (p. 518).

The scenic beauty of an area clearly adds to the image of the rural idyll, and consists of both natural features and human-made constructions. One natural feature that is often used to judge the attractiveness of a landscape is the degree of openness. At the one extreme there are the open landscapes that are found in agricultural areas, while at the other extreme there are the closed landscapes that are full of trees. Research has shown that both extremes are considered to be less attractive than half-open landscapes with alternating patches of farmland and forest (McGranahan, 2008; Argent et al., 2009). The landscapes in North-Netherlands generally have one of three soil types: marine clay, former peat, and sand. In general, places with clay and peat soil can be characterised as

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