



# Beyond the local-newcomer divide: Village attachment in the era of mobilities



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## ABSTRACT

Villages are often perceived as close-knit societies to which residents feel strongly attached. In the era of mobilities, rural residents have more opportunities to choose their own degree and form of village attachment. This challenges the distinction between locals and newcomers, which is frequently made, where the latter are considered to have only weak village attachment compared to the former. To assess contemporary types of village attachment, we employed a latent class analysis using survey data on 7684 residents of small villages and outlying areas in the Netherlands. Based on their degrees of social, functional, cultural and environmental attachment we categorised rural residents into seven groups according to their type of village attachment: traditionally attached, socially attached, rural idyll seekers, rest seekers, slightly attached, footloose and reluctantly attached. The results demonstrate meaningful variation in people-place relationships in Dutch villages. Moreover, they underscore that simple distinctions such as that between locals and newcomers do not suffice to describe this variation.

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## 1. Introduction

'Peet has never left his village. He lived in the closed circuits of family, relations, friends and neighbours. On some mornings he would leave a bunch of carrots on the doorstep of someone he liked, or a cauliflower, or a few leeks'. Thus, Geert Mak (2001) begins his popular novel on post-war sociocultural change in the Dutch village of Jorwerd, illustrating a degree of village attachment that is hard to imagine today. Although in some media and policy discourse the idea that rural areas have remained traditional and static persists (Woods, 2011), increased mobility and technology has enabled attachments beyond one's own living environment. In the words of Halfacree, this 'is concerned with forging identity and lifestyle through multiple places that does not depend on the core sedentary assumption of a single, settled home place' (2012, p. 214). The geographical scope of many people's lives, and especially those living in the countryside, has been greatly extended over the past decades. This increased outward orientation can be interpreted as a sign that the type of village attachment described in Mak's novel is waning.

However, even in the era of mobilities, village attachment remains significant in the lives of most rural residents (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014). Through increased levels of daily, residential and digital mobility, contemporary rural residents are able to develop more diverse forms of attachment to their village. Rural residents differ on how they would like to interact with the village and its surroundings. This diversity in people-place relationships can partly be explained by differences in access to mobility: mobile people are likely to develop different types of attachment and may perceive places as meaningful for other reasons than less mobile residents (Gustafson, 2013; Bell and Osti 2010). Mobility does not necessarily weaken people-place relationships but may provide rural residents with opportunities to become attached to their villages in myriad ways and degrees.

When discussing different types of rural residents, one frequently made distinction is that between autochthonous villagers and newcomers. Born and bred locals are assumed to be less mobile and more strongly attached to their village compared to newcomers who are more outwardly oriented (Relph, 1976; Hay, 1998). In some cases, this has led to cultural tensions and conflict between the two segments of a village population, as both are believed to have different values and desires regarding their living environment (Cloke et al., 1997; Smith and Krannich, 2000). However, with migration to the rural being a familiar phenomenon

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since the 1970s, newcomers have become a highly diverse category. While a share of them migrated to a village to enhance their quality of life (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009; van Dam et al., 2002), other new residents migrated for affordable housing or due to family relationships (Stockdale, 2015; Bijker et al., 2012). And whereas some are primarily interested in peace and quiet, others are among the most active residents in the village (Gustafson, 2009). In addition, among village-born residents – a minority in most present-day Dutch villages (Vermeij, 2015) – there is also considerable variation in people-place relationships. While some struggle to maintain threatened village facilities, others gladly embrace the individual freedom resulting from less social control, or disappointedly turn their back on the village they no longer feel part of.

This paper considers whether a traditional local versus newcomer divide still suffices to capture the diversity of contemporary people-place relationships in villages. While diversity in these relationships is widely recognised (cf. Cloke et al., 1997; Marsden et al., 1993; Woods, 2011; Ruiz and Domon, 2012; Smith, 2007), an empirically supported typology of present-day rural residents based on how they are attached to their village is currently lacking. This study aims to fill this gap by proposing a typology of village attachment based on various dimensions of place attachment. To do so, we pose two questions: What types of village attachment can be distinguished in the rural areas of the present-day Netherlands? And which sociodemographic variables coincide with what type of village attachment?

Before addressing these questions, we will discuss the relationship between mobility and place attachment. This will be followed by an explanation of how present-day rural residents may be attached to their villages according to various dimensions of place. The method is further explained in the subsequent method-section, followed by the results and the discussion.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Mobile residents, mobile attachment

Mobility in the rural is not a new phenomenon (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015); however, its ubiquitous nature has changed the social, economic and cultural structures of many present-day villages. One way in which mobility has increased is in the daily transport opportunities of residents. Most rural inhabitants have access to one or multiple cars (Noack, 2011; Steenbekkers and Vermeij, 2013), and their use of transport has increased steadily over recent decades (van Wee et al., 2006). It has now reached an average of over 1 h travel time and 35 km daily (Steenbekkers and Vermeij, 2013). Changes in residential mobility have also had an impact. The extended scale of daily mobility has resulted in more opportunities to combine life in the village with social and professional networks at other locations (Smith, 2007; Boyle and Halfacree, 1998). In recent decades, physical and residential movement has been complemented by digital mobility (Salemink et al., 2016). Although some rural areas still have to cope with slow online connectivity, digital activities are having an increasing impact on the lives of rural residents (Steenbekkers et al., 2006).

These various types of mobility have created an increasingly mobile lifestyle (Urry, 2007; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Larsen et al., 2006). Accordingly, mobility has become the locus of processes of identity formation (Easthope, 2009; Cresswell, 2011), social inclusion (Oliva, 2010) and sense of place (Barcus and Brunn, 2010). This raises questions concerning how contemporary rural residents are attached to their residential environment (cf. Bauman, 2000; Castells, 1996). Previous research has found that mobile people become 'liberated from place' (Lewicka, 2005, p. 383), meaning that mobile residents become less dependent on their local

environment. The traditional close-knit village community, with deeply rooted village bonds, has become a community with limited commitment to the local (Hunter and Suttles, 1972; Groot, 1989; Vermeij, 2015). However, it has also been suggested that although the overall intensity of the attachment to a village has diminished over the years, a 're-discovery of place' may be occurring (Lewicka, 2005, p. 382). Thus, mobility does not prevent residents from developing a meaningful relationship with their place of residence (Antonsich, 2010; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014), and may even encourage them to do so (Ralph and Staeheli, 2011).

Mobility and place attachment are often treated as two extremes on one continuum (Gustafson, 2013). Most studies have found that the length of residence correlates positively with place attachment (cf. Brehm et al., 2006; Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974). However, this depends on the specific dimension of place attachment. There is some empirical evidence to suggest that social attachment is significantly correlated to length of residence, while attachment to the natural environment is not (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Gustafson (2009) also demonstrated that people who recently moved to the countryside can have strong social bonds with fellow residents. He gives the example of Swedish business travellers who, despite their cosmopolitan lifestyle, actively participate in village life and feel strongly attached to the social qualities of the village. Therefore, mobility should not be automatically associated with low levels of place attachment and vice versa. In fact, through the use of the technology, the tendency to work or pursue leisure activities at a distance from the birth region is gaining popularity and leading people to develop emotional bonds with various places at the same time (Barcus and Brunn, 2010).

That new rural residents can develop strong attachments to their living environment is partly due to people making more informed decisions to reside in places that are congruent with their life stories. Savage et al (2005, p. 29). argued that places have become 'sites to perform identities' and are selected to 'tell stories that indicate how their arrival and subsequent settlement is appropriate to their sense of themselves'. Accordingly, rural residents are able to choose how they want to be attached to their residential area on the basis of their preferred lifestyle. However, not all residents have equal opportunities to live a mobile life, with some rural residents remaining immobile (Franquesa, 2011; Hannam et al., 2006; Hedberg and do Carmo, 2012). While mobility has become a precondition for societal and economic inclusion (Oliva, 2010; Spinney et al., 2009), not having access to either a car or an appropriate online connection could lead to marginalisation. In particular, older rural residents and those living in remote rural areas are least mobile as a result of circumstances rather than choice. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that place attachment and mobility 'mean different things, to different people in different situations' (Gustafson, 2001, p. 681).

### 2.2. Dimensions of place attachment

In the present study, we aim to establish a typology of rural residents according to what their village means to them in terms of their sense of attachment. As a starting point for this typology, we use dimensions of place attachment, within which such village attachment may evolve. Gustafson (2006, p. 19) defined place attachment as 'bonds between people and place based on affection (emotion, feeling), cognition (thought, knowledge, belief) and practice (action, behavior)'. We are interested in the relationship between rural residents and how they are attached to various aspects of place, rather than the manifestations of place attachment. We therefore focus on the aspects of the village that may matter to residents, assuming that attachment to those aspects can have

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