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"*I think that they should go. Let them see something*". The context of rural youth's out-migration in post-socialist Estonia

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A B S T R A C T

This article aims to provide insights into the topic of rural out-migration in Estonia. By looking at media and in-depth interviews with rural youth workers, narratives surrounding young people are examined. These narratives enable rural youth to ground their choices of migration. Rurality is constructed in media through two powerful templates: one of structural marginalization and the other of the "pastoral idyll" based on the stereotypes of nation construction. Youth migration is often explained in media as self-realisation or inevitable moves. Rural youth workers are concerned about young people leaving their home areas, but at the same time they rationalise their leaving by contemporary narratives of self-empowerment and self-expression. Thus, leaving is depicted as moving "forward" rather than "away". In addition, the constantly changing rural context in post-socialist Estonia contributes to a notion of non-fixity in life course decisions and the perception that it is always possible to come back.

1. Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, post-socialist Estonia has gone through remarkable demographic and regional changes. In recent decades, the development of Estonian rural areas has been accompanied by a diminishing birth rate, urbanisation and dissolution of the Soviet agricultural structures. The restructuring process from collective farms to private farming has been far from smooth. This has resulted in the marginalisation of some rural areas, structurally as well as in discursive fields. The diminishing size of the rural population has led to the closing down of many vital social structures in some regions. Along with shops, pharmacies, libraries and local pubs, schools have been closed. Many argue that the closing of schools in particular may result in the extinction of the rural population altogether, since young people will not come back to their home areas after studying elsewhere. Thus, closing schools can be perceived as a "loss of a new generation" (see also Haartsen and van Wissen, 2012, p. 489; Kovács, 2012, p. 113). Those who leave are also potentially most useful to the area, being educated and active (Demi et al., 2009, p. 326; Stockdale, 2004, 2006), and therefore migration can be defined as one of the most critical issues related to rural youth (Auclair and Vanoni, 2004, p. 103; Gibson and Argent, 2008; Thissen et al., 2010, p. 428). The problem is acute even in countries where counter-urbanization has otherwise been a strong trend in recent decades (e.g. in Britain; see Woods, 2011, p. 179).

This article looks at the question of rural youth out-migration from somewhat novel angle. Instead of concentrating on the opinions of the young people themselves, a glance at media discourses and youth worker's opinions are offered, relying on a qualitative content analysis of the biggest daily (*Postimees*) in Estonia during 2010 ($N = 157$ articles) and 17 qualitative interviews with youth workers[1] conducted during several fieldwork projects in 2010–2012. By leaving the voices of the youth aside, this paper does not imply that young people have little agency in their migration decisions. However, it suggests that young people operate in complex discursive fields, and studying those fields from the viewpoint of youth migration is often neglected in rural youth research. The paper advocates that studying the contexts young people deal with, may be as crucial as researching the dispositions of the youth. Looking at the Estonian media and youth worker's discourses, for example, has shown that there is more to it than just closing down the infrastructures that may influence the migration decisions of the young people. The discursive constructs surrounding youth tend to normalize the practices of leaving by conceptualising leaving as moving forward rather than moving away.

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[1] "Youth workers" as a term is used here and throughout the article only conditionally. As rural areas are sparsely populated, those dealing with young people are not always specifically youth workers; they may also be other officials or enthusiasts who deal with young people in their free time or during work hours. For details, see Appendix I.

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The article begins with a discussion of the research background concerning rurality and youth. Then, there is a brief look at the Estonian rural context, and demographic and geographical conditions. After describing the methodology and data of this article, an analysis of media discourses and the interviews with the youth workers follows.

2. Theoretical background

There is no agreement on an objective definition of rurality (Woods, 2011, p. 34)[2] since the character of rural areas is often nation-specific (Thissen et al., 2010, p. 429). Rurality is thus an "imagined entity" (Woods, 2011, p. 9) or "a category of thought" (Mormont, 1990, p. 4). What is constructed as rurality in discursive fields precedes the rural experience and shapes our understanding and practices, as well as influences the actual lives of rural people (Cloke, 2006, p. 22; Mormont, 1990, p. 40; McGrath, 2001, p. 482). When studying the rural, then, both conceptual constructions and local contexts should be taken into account, but also the interrelations between them. Places can become agents in power relations, and coming from a certain geographical location which has been marginalised in discursive fields can be a source of marginalisation for individuals as well (Schucksmith, 2012, p. 387).

Keith Halfacree (2006) has suggested that rural research should focus equally on representations of the rural, rural localities and the lived experiences of rural life (p. 51).[3] Otherwise, there is the danger of overlooking the complexities of rural sites and simplifying contexts: of contrasting rurality and urbanity (Bushin et al., 2007, p. 69; Schucksmith, 2004; pp. 9–10), and ignoring the possibility of the rural and urban coexisting in rural areas (Krange and Skogen, 2007, p. 215). Often contradictory and different meanings coexist in rural societies (Kloep et al., 2003, p. 93), and young individuals can have different aspirations that compete with each other. Thus, the contextualisation of their surroundings is important (Gibson and Argent, 2008, p. 138, Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 337; Rye, 2011, p. 177).

This paper tries to contextualise the discourses in the media as well as the "lived experiences" of youth workers, providing some background data on rural life in Estonia. It aims to contribute to filling the gap in post-socialist and Estonian rural youth research (see also Schäfer, 2007; Trell et al. 2012). Rural youth studies is a relatively young research field, having emerged on a broader scale only in the 1990s (Panelli et al. 2007, p. 6). One of the most covered topics in rural youth research has recently been young people's mobility: the considerations and mechanisms of young people's out-migration from their home regions (or, exploring the reasons for staying there) (Jones, 1999; Jamieson, 2000; McGrath, 2001; Kloep et al., 2003; Stockdale, 2004, 2006; Howley, 2006; Krange and Skogen, 2007; Gibson and Argent, 2008; Demi et al., 2009; Rye, 2011; Irvin et al., 2012; Schucksmith, 2012 etc.). In several of these studies it has been suggested that there are certain patterns in rural out-migration. In rural societies, social mobility and geographical mobility are often interconnected (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006, p. 290; Thissen et al., 2010, p. 428; Rye, 2011). Therefore, perhaps not surprisingly, those more likely to out-migrate are also those who are prone to experience upward social mobility or those from upper social layers. Migration tends to be class-specific: young people from the educated middle class often leave rural areas in search of a better education or job opportunities (Rye and Blekesaune, 2007, p. 174). In addition to higher parts of the class pyramid, the lowest (least educated and at risk of poverty) group is inclined to out-migrate as well, also looking for better economic conditions (Rye and Blekesaune, 2007, p. 175; Demi et al., 2009, p. 326). Several studies have examined the out-migration patterns of other groups: women tend to leave more compared to men (they have higher educational aspirations, but they are also more annoyed by rural common characteristics, such as gossip and closed communities); the descendants of in-migrants leave more often compared to those of rooted members of rural communities etc. (Jones, 1999; Kloep et al., 2003; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Rye and Blekesaune, 2007; Drozdzewski, 2008; Thissen et al., 2010; Irvin et al., 2012).

However, there seems to be more to the question of the urbanisation of rural youth than meets the eye, as these patterns are not always universal (Jones, 1999; Jamieson, 2000; Rye and Blekesaune, 2007; Stockdale, 2006). Even though quantitative surveys show that economic and educational reasons dominate in migration considerations among rural youth, at least some of the reasons may have to do with young people negotiating their transitions to adulthood in the contemporary world. Zygmunt Bauman depicts contemporary life as being constantly on the move, avoiding fixity (1998b, p. 76). The constantly changing society (not least in the rural context) weakens shared social norms and communities, leaving the world fragmented and individuals having to reflexively adjust and construct their identities, changing along with society and dividing their identities between different social groups and places (Jones, 1999). All this has lead to individualization: the individual self and his/her needs are at the centre of social life (Beck, 1992, p. 135; Bauman, 1998b; Honneth, 2004, p. 466). Predefined life paths have been replaced by choice biographies (du Bois-Reymond, 1995), and the main keyword in planning one's biography has become self-fulfilment. Mobility is thus often seen today as part of the transition to adulthood, as this contributes to the "self" project by offering experiences and self-enhancement (Smith et al. 2002, p. 177; Thomson and Taylor, 2005; Cairns, 2008). This is also true of rural youth aspirations: out-migration can be a project of personal development (Stockdale, 2006, p. 360). In certain areas and discursive fields, there may exist what has been labelled a "culture of migration", signifying the cultural meaning and ideas of out-migration as a positive and expected process (Easthope and Gabriel, 2008, p. 173; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006, p. 291; Rye, 2011, p. 172).

Individualization has many faces and takes many forms; it is "socially situated": what may be freedom and possibilities for one, may be a burden for another (Roberts et al., 1994; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Evans, 2002; Skeggs, 2004; Côté and Bynner, 2008; Woodman, 2009, 2010; Grytnes, 2011; Nugin, 2013). Mobility, thus, can be a resource and lack of mobility can cause marginalisation (Bauman, 1998a; Schucksmith, 2012). In other words, such social determinants as class, race and geographical location still play a role in transitions (Thomson and Taylor, 2005, p. 327). While in upper social layers the chances for mobility and self-realization in different parts of the world are more available, for many social groups the range of choices and opportunities for self-realization is limited. Yet, the option not to choose is unavailable: the proportion of decisions that have to be made individually has grown in every social layer and one has to pay equally for decisions taken or not taken (Beck, 1992, p. 130). Hence, for rural youth, the decision to stay at home is as important as the decision to leave (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006, p. 292), and the decision to stay can also serve the purpose of self-fulfilment (Krange and Skogen, 2007, p. 219). In fact, the decision to leave or stay has become

[2] However, there have been several attempts to define rurality by measures of population density, distance from cities, dwelling types, availability of infrastructure or economic activity (with a predominance of agricultural production and a small number of white-collar jobs) (see i.e. Clout, 1984; Rural Household's…, 2007, pp. 101–116).

[3] Compare also: Matthews and Tucker (2007, p. 96), in regard to (a) perceived, (b) conceived and (c) lived rural space, based on Lefebvre (1991).