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Exploring the role of mobility for young people’s wellbeing in Northern Finland

Teresa Komu and Ria-Maria Adams

Introduction

It is common for young people in rural Finland leave their place of birth. Like all the Nordic countries, Finland is experiencing population growth in its larger, urban settlements, and population decline in its smaller, rural ones (Jungsberg et al. 2019, p. 23). Among the Nordic countries, Finland has the largest number of rural regions with declining youth populations, and Lapland is one of the most seriously impacted regions (Karlsdóttir et al. 2020). The trend towards urbanization is largely driven by young people, who account for a significant proportion of Finland’s internal migration, and it is peripheral, rural areas, in particular, that are losing young people (Aro 2018; Valtion nuorisoneuvosto 2019). Far from being solely a Finnish phenomenon, the outmigration of rural youth is a global trend affecting the entire Arctic and the developed countries in general (Carson et al. 2016; Farrugia 2016; Corbett and Forsey 2017). Indeed, it has been suggested that as part of growing up in rural places, young people have to “learn to leave” them (Corbett 2007; Kiilakoski 2016, pp. 47–49).

Many researchers have referred to a “mobility imperative” when discussing the outmigration of rural youth: young people are being driven out by structural inequality whereby cultural and economic capital becomes concentrated in cities, leaving rural living symbolically portrayed as inferior to urban life (Armila 2016; Farrugia 2016; Tuuva-Hongisto et al. 2016). Such a view not only casts migration in a predominantly negative light but also risks overlooking young people’s own views and agency. Furthermore, research on youth migration has shown that a desire to migrate is not tied to local conditions and that youth outmigration is not a specifically rural phenomenon (Tuhkunen 2007, pp. 10, 145–146). Young people in general are highly mobile and tend to leave rural areas, whether or not these are in decline (Seyfrit et al. 2010; Carson et al. 2016, p. 382).

We suggest that one might approach rural youth outmigration in northern Finland as a manifestation of a “culture of migration” (see Massey et al. 1993; Horváth 2008). In addition, we wish to focus on young people’s own understandings of wellbeing and on the kind of role mobility plays in these. We understand migration as an act of individual agency,¹ one driven by

future aspirations that are facilitated and constrained by material, social and cultural conditions (Carling and Collins 2018). We further the discussion started by recent anthropological research on the relations between place and wellbeing (see Ferraro and Barletti 2016), in particular the article by Neil Thin (2016) dealing with the interplay between wellbeing, place and mobility. Thin argues that research and policymaking often assume that wellbeing is rooted in being in a particular place and that certain place characteristics, as well as place attachment, determine a person’s wellbeing. Instead, he calls for an understanding of wellbeing as the result of people’s dynamic interactions with places, in which purposeful relocations may play an important role in the pursuit of wellbeing (Thin 2016, pp. 6–11).

In the following, we argue that mobility, in the form of both everyday mobility and long-term migration to another place, is necessary for the wellbeing of young people in rural areas, whose lives are characterized by long distances. Further, we suggest that outmigration has come to represent a key transitional phase in young rural Finns’ pursuit of individual life paths and self-actualization—components of the “good life” in modern Western societies. To date there has been little discussion between the fields of youth migration and the “anthropology of the good” in the context of the Global North. By combining these perspectives, our research aims to fill gaps in the present knowledge. Next, we discuss how the relations between mobility and wellbeing appear in our case study of young people living in, leaving and returning to their place of birth, Kolari, a municipality in the northern “periphery” of Finland.

Northern culture of migration

Around the world, especially in remote areas, “cultures of migration” have arisen in which youth migration is normalized, valued and expected (Easthope and Gabriel 2008). The current generation of young people is increasingly mobile (Robertson et al. 2018) and is arguably affected by discourses that normalize mobility (Jamieson 2000; Kiilakoski 2016; Rönnlund 2019). According to several prominent authors, Western societies have experienced a fundamental shift in values over the last century and have begun to encourage and value individualization and mobility over social stability (Taylor 1989; Giddens 1991; Bauman 2001). No longer bound to kinship relations and place, people have gone from “living for others” and from prioritizing local communities to pursuing self-actualization and a “life of one’s own” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 54). Instead of following in their parents’ footsteps, people in modern societies are encouraged to pursue individual life paths. Migration may offer a means to realize one’s individualistic pursuit of the good life (Tuhkunen 2007, p. 12, 159).

When mobility is the cultural norm, people who stay rooted in their home places become regarded as anomalies. Especially in the rural context “stayers” often find themselves negatively stereotyped as being “left behind” and disadvantaged (Jamieson 2000; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). According to Timo

Aro (2007a, 2007b), migration from rural and peripheral areas has a long-standing history in Finland. Migration trends in the country have flowed in the same directions since the nineteenth century: from rural areas to urban growth centres, from north to south and from east to west. In the 2000s, a major proportion of those migrating internally consist of young people and students (Aro 2007a, 2007b, p. 375). Outmigration has been a part of life in the remote rural areas of northern and eastern Finland for several generations and has reportedly become a social norm for young people. For them, moving is a way to “realize one’s potential”, while staying is a sign of being “stuck” (Ollila 2008; Hartikainen 2016). In fact, some scholars have argued that, especially in rural areas, leaving one’s birthplace has become part of adolescence (Tuhkunen 2007, p. 159; Robertson et al. 2018).

Throughout the twenty-first century, young people in Finland have expressed a high readiness to migrate to search for employment.² A willingness to migrate seems to be highest in rural and peripheral areas, and it is not uncommon for municipalities there to lose 40 to 60 per cent of their young population (Penttinen 2016, p. 149; Karlsdóttir et al. 2020, p. 36). However, “movers” are also the dominant group in urban areas (Tuhkunen 2007, pp. 10, 145–146). A birth cohort study that followed all Finnish children born in 1987 indicates that by the age of 28 only 4 per cent had never moved and more than half (52 per cent) had moved on between four and nine occasions (Moisio et al. 2016, pp. 34–35).³ When examined by municipal borders, 90 per cent of the area of Finland experiences outmigration (Heleniak 2020, p. 46). Young Finnish people, and Nordic youth in general, also tend to leave their childhood homes 10 to 12 years earlier than youth living in southern Europe (Karlsdóttir et al. 2020, p. 34).⁴

Nevertheless, attitudes towards youth migration are twofold, and young people are both encouraged and criticized for following their individual aspirations (Corbett and Forsey 2017, p. 430). It seems that especially in rural areas youth outmigration causes a conflict between the individual pursuit of wellbeing (young people) and the promotion of collective wellbeing (local communities). Current policy discourses tend to encourage youth mobility and educational aspirations (Robertson et al. 2018). Modern societies need flexible, mobile labour, and young people are encouraged to become educated and to be willing to move to search for work. At the same time, young people are urged to be loyal and to stay to rebuild their local communities, whose viability and social cohesion are seen as threatened by modern individualism and mobility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 3; Corbett and Forsey 2017, p. 430). In peripheral and rural areas, educational mobility and youth outmigration prompt concerns, such as “brain drain” (Pitkänen et al. 2017, p. 95), demographic and economic decline (Carson et al. 2016, p. 382) and the concomitant increase in the median age of the population (Hamilton 2010, p. 7). Young people are left with a conundrum: they should leave for their own good and, at the same time, stay for the good of their communities (Corbett and Forsey 2017, p. 440).

Attitudes towards migration and mobility reveal implicit assumptions about their relation to wellbeing and “good” or normative ways to live. Migration has been seen both as beneficial and harmful for the wellbeing of individuals and societies. According to Liisa Malkki (2012), research and common sense generally posit stability and attachment as natural states of being, and mobility and migration as pathologies that demand explanation. In Western thinking, place attachment and being “rooted” has historically been given a positive value, whereas mobility and displacement have been considered sources of ill-being and forms of chaos (Tuhkunen 2007, p. 18; Malkki 2012, pp. 30–41). A prominent cause of the criticism directed at “mobile modernity” has been the assumption that displacements pose a threat to wellbeing (Thin 2016, p. 11). As noted by Aro, in agrarian Finland migration and urbanization were perceived as harmful and problematic, and people who migrated as morally dubious. Historically, migration has been encouraged, but it has also been restricted through various governmental actions (Aro 2007a, 2007b).

In various cultures, ritual displacements and deliberate dis-attachment are, in fact, considered essential for both individual and collective wellbeing (Thin 2016, p. 11).⁵ We suggest that the normalization of rural youth outmigration and its positive associations implies that in modern Finnish culture it serves as a necessary transition in a young person’s quest for “self-actualization” and pursuit of the good life. The sacrifice that comes with leaving one’s birthplace and social network is necessary if a young person is to be able to fulfil the modern demand of individualism and of realizing his or her “potential”. In turn, those who never leave their birthplace “fail” to meet these expectations, which could explain why stayers are disparaged even if their decision might benefit the community. In sum, in a culture of migration, the wellbeing and self-fulfillment of an individual require mobility.

Methodology

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the municipality of Kolari in Finnish Lapland. All data were collected during multiple fieldwork periods between February 2019 and August 2020. The definition of “youth” varies from culture to culture (Clark 2011). Here, we apply the national, legal definitions of the Finnish government. The 2017 Finnish Youth Act defines persons up to and including the age of 29 years as youths. Our research participants are between 16 and 29 years of age. Participants were informed throughout the research process that our aim was to examine different aspects of wellbeing from the young people’s own perspective and consider how they figure in their decisions to either stay or leave Kolari.

Our main research methods were participant observation (Bernard 2006; Robben and Sluka 2012) and unstructured interviews; the latter were conducted in the form of conversations in which interaction between the participants was encouraged. (Sardan 2015). Participant observation included involvement in local family sports events, the local circus’s spring show,

penkkarit—a traditional Finnish event on upper secondary school students’ last day of school before starting their studying break—and several visits to the local upper secondary school and youth centre. Furthermore, time was spent at the “hot spots” of the region’s winter tourism centres, where young people work and spend their leisure time. In addition, all the shops, “hang-outs” and restaurants favoured by local youth were visited. During times of physical absence, social media accounts, such as Instagram and Facebook, were used to “stay connected to the field”.

Most of the research material consists of unstructured interviews with young people. The interviews adhered to specific, prepared questions and were conducted while participating in everyday activities of the youth. These conversations lasted from a few minutes to two-hour in-depth conversations that included biographical stories. In addition, two focus group interviews were conducted in two different settings with between three and six participants. Such an arrangement offers a forum in which young people are stimulated by each other’s comments, which has advantages for understanding peer-to-peer influences and shared understandings (Clark 2011, p. 72). Furthermore, one in-depth interview was conducted in the neighbouring municipality of Rovaniemi, with an informant who had recently left Kolari for educational reasons and to experience living in a larger city. Fieldnotes were recorded on the participant observation as well as the unstructured interviews.

We received additional information from institutional youth workers and teachers who, by virtue of their profession, provided valuable insights. They served as key persons in initiating contacts with the local youth and made it possible for the research to take place in a setting that was familiar to our informants. During data analysis, the fieldnotes were transcribed, coded and categorized and then analysed in the light of existing research. The quotations that we use in our analysis are taken from the fieldwork notes and the interview transcriptions. Because we are dealing with a small community, all of the names in the quotations are pseudonyms, and we have chosen not to use specific information regarding the names of particular places or the exact ages of our informants.

The municipality of Kolari and the Finnish “periphery”

Finland is one of the Nordic welfare states, whose policies support individual pursuits of self-actualization and wellbeing. Such welfare countries are characterized by comprehensive social security, free education and a high level of social trust. Nordic countries score well in the international rankings of human development, wellbeing, quality of life and happiness (Lundgren and Cuadrado 2020, pp. 130, 138).⁶ Finland is a sparsely populated country, most of whose area is classified as “predominantly rural”; it is characterized by strong centralization of the population in southern growth centres (Nilsson and Jokinen 2020, p. 17). Around 5 per cent of the population in Finland lives in remote rural areas, which make up 70 per cent of the country’s surface area. By contrast, over 70 per cent of the population lives in urban areas

(Helminen et al. 2020). Generally speaking, rural areas in Finland are experiencing a decline in services, a decreasing and ageing population and outmigration (Sireni et al. 2017, pp. 46, 14–15).

The lives of young rural people are often affected by a lack of transportation, educational opportunities and leisure activities (Wrede-Jäntti 2020, pp. 7, 13), and this is also true of Kolari. Long distances and their effect on everyday life in remote, sparsely populated areas is well recognized in previous research on rural youth (see, for example, Armila et al. 2016). In the case of Kolari, long distances influenced various aspects of the young people's lives from education to shopping, leisure and medical care. Many of the young people whom we interviewed lived either quite long distances from the municipal centre or school or had to commute long distances to see their friends or relatives.

Educational and regional policy decisions have contributed to the outmigration of rural youth. Peripheral areas are losing educational institutions as public services and leisure activities are being concentrated in growth centres (Kivijärvi and Peltola 2016, pp. 5–6). On the other hand, favourable support structures and educational support policies, such as study grants and youth housing, allow young people to become financially independent from their families quickly, supporting them in leaving the parental home (Karlsdóttir et al. 2020, p. 34). Thus, in Finland, while there are young people who wish to move but lack the resources to do so, finances are not as critical a consideration as, for example, in the Russian context (see Bolotova, this volume). This is an example of how welfare politics can encourage and support certain ways of living and how welfare is one way of ensuring the creation of educated, self-managing citizens needed by modern societies (Gulløv 2011, p. 31).

Our case municipality, Kolari, is located in northern Finland close to the Swedish–Finnish border and approximately 120 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle. It is one of Finland's sparsely populated, northern rural municipalities characterized by a narrow economic structure, low intensity of land use, a harsh climate, long distances and remoteness from shopping centres, health care services and urban settlements (Helminen et al. 2014; Borges 2020, p. 73). Kolari is a relatively small municipality; its population of 3,834 and population density of only 1.5 inhabitants per square kilometre (Kuntaliitto 2019a) are characteristic of northern rural towns. In 2018, only 7.2 per cent of the population in the municipality were aged between 15 and 24 (Kuntaliitto 2019b). At the time the fieldwork was conducted, Kolari had 40 upper secondary students, a number reflecting the population dynamics of many northern municipalities, which tend to have many pensioners and few young families and many of whose young people have already left to pursue an education.

Tourism is the most important and a growing livelihood in Kolari,⁷ which boasts the ski resort Hiihtokeskus IsoYlläs⁸ on Yllästunturi Fell and the popular Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park⁹, as well as the thriving tourism village of Äkäslompolo. During the high season in the winter months, thousands of international and national tourists visit the fell villages without ever passing through or visiting the actual centre of Kolari, where the schools,

town hall, library, and youth centre are located. The tourist-oriented villages have their own shops as well as a variety of restaurants and bars, which are busy during the tourism season. Many temporary workers arrive from southern parts of Finland during the winter season, but once the season is over, the villages become silent.

While the municipality's tourism villages have a growing number of inhabitants, the overall population and economy in Kolari is declining (Similä and Jokinen 2018, p. 155). Employment and youth outmigration continue to present challenges to the municipality, which is seeking new ways to employ people year-round. For example, since 2006 two different mining companies have been making plans to re-open the old open-pit Hannukainen mine. Although the local tourism industry has protested against it, the mine is expected to bring new job opportunities, boost the regional and local economy and breathe new life into the municipality (Similä and Jokinen 2018; Komu 2019).

Leaving to pursue one's dreams

The pursuit of individual happiness is highly valued in Western cultures (Thin 2009, pp. 30, 35) and this is reflected in our young informants' reasons for moving away from Kolari, where they were born. It is well established in the literature that a significant driver of rural youth outmigration is a desire to find employment and education opportunities (see, for example, Tuuva-Hongisto et al. 2016). However, in the case of Kolari it is not a lack of job opportunities per se that has been driving young people to leave. In fact, young people indicated that they knew there was work available in Kolari in certain sectors, such as tourism or elderly care. The nearby Swedish border makes commuting across national borders an attractive career opportunity, providing higher salaries in some sectors, for example health care. The key motivator for young people, however, was to have the opportunity to do work that would be worthwhile and *meaningful* from their perspective, as the following excerpt shows:

I am interested in interior design or economic studies and not in elderly care. I know I could get a job immediately in the caregiving sector, but I just don't want that.¹⁰

(young female)

The participants in our case study area are not primarily seeking temporary employment (*kausityöntekijä*), readily available in the tourism sector. Needless to say, they take jobs to earn some money by cleaning cottages or working at a local enterprise, but in the long run they generally dream of having work that corresponds to their education and aptitudes and is more permanent. Often, young people from southern Finland come to work during the winter tourism season and, once the work is done, they return to their homes. To be sure, some of the local youth dream of being part of the

growing local tourism business, in which they see enormous potential for finding future employment.

While the planned mining project could offer future work opportunities and breathe new life into the municipality, young people remained ambivalent toward it. The positive effects of an active mine are visible in the neighbouring town, Pajala, on the Swedish side of the border. A better infrastructure and range of local services—direct benefits of the mine—are shaping the community into a more attractive place to live. On the other hand, the young people in Kolari are unsure if and when exactly the Hannukainen mine would open and what specific jobs it would provide for them. Even though the tensions around the mining project overall are high in the municipality, it did not seem like a relevant issue for many of the young people. As one noted:

I don't really care about the mining project. Who knows if it really even ever opens? I don't really have an opinion. There is so much for and against the mine. I just stay out of the discussion.

(young female)

Overall, the mining project did not seem like a big attraction compelling young people to stay in Kolari. Again, the *types* of jobs it could provide was a more important factor than its overall ability to provide jobs. Our preliminary findings are in line with previous research, which has demonstrated that even though large-scale industrial projects may create new job opportunities locally, they do little to stop young people from moving away from rural communities (Seyfrit et al. 2010).

An important aspect of the good life and wellbeing for young people in Kolari is being able to work in a job that they consider both meaningful and sustaining (see also, Myllyniemi 2016, p. 27). What makes life meaningful is understood in different ways at the individual level, but it is also conditioned culturally. A cross-cultural study by Gordon Mathews on Hong Kong, Japan and the United States found that in all three societies family and work were the most common answers participants gave when asked: “What makes life worth living?” (Mathews 2009, pp. 176–177, 180). While the opinions on what kind of work was considered meaningful varied individually in our case study, most young people shared a view of work as something that should bring meaningfulness to one's life and provide an outlet for self-fulfillment.

The selectiveness regarding job aspirations observed in our case study seems to be an expression of the previously discussed modern outlook that encourages the pursuit of individual life paths and dreams. An important difference between the Finnish migration of the past and the present is that while migration has perhaps always been sparked by the pursuit of a “better” life, today it is motivated more by personal ambitions and visions of wellbeing than by a compelling need to make a living (Aro 2007a, 2007b, p. 371). This is largely a reflection of the conditions of life in the current welfare state. For example, for the generation born in the beginning of the twentieth century, who experienced war and the rebuilding of the country, chasing a

personal “dream job” was probably not a priority amidst the struggles of everyday life (Häkkinen and Salasuo 2016, p. 185).

In pursuing one’s dreams, the choice of the right education path becomes an important factor. Lack of secondary education is statistically the strongest indicator for future marginalization and ill-being for young people (Armila 2016, p. 11; Ristikari et al. 2016, p. 97). As in many peripheral municipalities, only upper secondary education is possible in Kolari. For anything else—vocational schools, universities or universities of applied sciences—young people need to move elsewhere. The municipality tries to actively strengthen different educational paths that would not require young people to move away by offering local apprenticeships and distance learning opportunities. Yet after upper secondary school there are only a few options in distance learning classes, causing young people to leave the community to pursue their desired education. Some of the youth already leave after graduating from comprehensive school to attend vocational school or an upper secondary school with special emphasis (e.g., languages, music or art). As the excerpt below indicates, many wished to continue to visit their hometown even after moving away to maintain their relations with family and friends:

I don’t want to leave Kolari except for my education I have to go to Kittilä during school weeks. Whenever it is possible, I return back home.
(young female)

While adolescents (youth under 18 years) tend to still be in the process of deciding whether or not to stay or leave, some of our older informants had already undergone the process of leaving and returning. As noted by Stockdale and Haartsen (2018, p. 2), leaving or staying is indeed not a one-off decision, but one made multiple times over the course of a person’s life. The reasons for these decisions vary individually, but they often have to do with returning to “one’s roots”. Given that remote regions, such as Kolari, are often unable to provide a variety of educational options and services, it has been suggested that the outmigration of young people could be perceived as beneficial, rather than harmful, in supporting their viability in the long run. Instead of trying to stop young people from migrating when leaving is the “social norm”, these regions could concentrate on encouraging them to return after they have acquired qualifications that could be much needed in the region (Borges 2020, p. 74).

The perks and perils of “everyone knows everyone”

Anthropological studies on the “good life” generally emphasize the importance of the social dimension for wellbeing (Mathews and Izquierdo 2009). Social relations, instead of place, can act as a grounding and defining factor in one’s decision to either leave or stay (Kivijärvi and Peltola 2016, p. 7). While social interaction is a source of wellbeing, individual wellbeing may also be constrained by the dynamics of social life. Kolari is a small community where,

as the young people describe it, “everyone knows everyone”. Depending on who was being asked, this close connection with peers could be perceived as either a positive or a negative factor.

For some young people, close connections and knowing each other well were connected to feelings of security and familiarity. In some cases, the desire to find a partner in their own community or another “northern” community was an important criterion, as only people from the North would understand their “northern way of life”. The importance of maintaining close social relations and their connection to this particular place was the most important factor of the “good life” for some youth, as the following excerpt shows:

I moved to Tornio during my secondary education, but I returned almost every weekend to see my friends and to hang out at home. I could not find work matching my training, so I decided to retrain for another job so I could stay here and wouldn't have to move far away. For me it is important to be able to stay where my friends and family are.

(young male)

In order to sustain close relations and friendships, young people in Kolari long for more public meeting places and hangouts. They often meet in private locations, such as their homes or cottages, because there is a lack of suitable places in town to gather without being supervised. Being just across the Swedish border, young people regularly visit Pajala for shopping and other activities. However, young people understand that from an economic standpoint it does not make sense to run meeting places in a small town. For adolescents, the municipality has organized a meeting place in the form of a youth centre called “Laguuni”, which is very popular especially among adolescents. Professional guidance is provided by social and youth workers, who have a warm-hearted relationship with the local youth. Young people come there to talk about issues that concern them, play billiards, have a coffee or some snacks, play in the newly added “gaming room” on computers (that some of them would not have access to in their homes) or use it as a space for personal regeneration and leisure. These youth centres are essential institutions in enhancing young people's wellbeing in remote towns and are highly valued among younger local youth.

Mobility and, on the other hand, immobility affected social relations in various ways. Living in a culture of migration shapes the way young people learn to conceive the nature of relationships and their temporary nature (Kiilakoski 2016, pp. 37–45). Many of the young people still currently living in Kolari mentioned family, friends and work colleagues who had left to work and live elsewhere. The absence of important people is a recurrent theme in the conversations, and “missing friends and family” was mentioned as a negative aspect of living in a remote place. Yet people who had already migrated could serve as an anchoring factor in prospective migrants' decision to leave. Young people wanted to move to cities where they already “know

someone”, wanting and needing a contact person (often a relative or a friend) whom they could trust and spend time with.

When it comes to local mobility, the story of one young female participant exemplifies the lived reality of local youth regarding the role of transportation and the importance of the ability to be mobile for upkeeping social relations:

The only means of transport that I can use on my own is the school bus. I live around 25 km from the centre of Kolari and if I want to hang out with a friend, I have to pre-arrange everything and stay over for the night if my parents are not willing to pick me up. Also, if a friend wants to visit me, she or he has to join me on the school bus, which the friend would have to pay for, which makes things more complicated. Also, I have friends who live on the other side of Kolari and I need to travel 50 km one way if I want to visit them. If I want to do any free-time activities I have to stay here after school and arrange for someone to pick me up afterwards.

(young female)

Social relations often played a role if one decided to return to Kolari after moving away. Starting a family on their own certainly brings some young people “back to their roots”, where the social network of a family plays a vital role. While youth migration flows from rural areas to growth centres, migration of parents with children generally flows from cities to rural and semi-urban areas (Moisio et al. 2016, p. 29). Finnish people in general perceive rural areas with ready access to nature as good places to live and raise children (Sireni et al. 2017, p. 45). Leaving may enable a young person to “self-actualize”, to get an education and possibly start a family, after which they are “ready” to move back. The proximity to a partner or to family plays an essential role in staying, leaving and returning, as this excerpt demonstrates:

I left when I was young and stayed many years in southern Finnish cities. But once I got children of my own, I started missing the network of my family. I married someone who is also from here and after a while we decided to move back. Now we both have jobs here and are happy that our kids can grow up here as well. I had a great relationship with my grandparents, and I want the same for my kids.

(young female)

Then again, for some, the narrow social circles of their home area were a reason to leave. Some young people have an urge to experience “something new” and to get to know new people, which, in a peripheral place, where new people only arrive occasionally, is rather impossible. Moreover, as our informants noted, finding a suitable partner is not always easy if “everyone knows everyone” and options are limited.

The importance of having “something to do”

In the participants’ perception, having access to a variety of free-time activities, especially winter sports and other outdoor activities, is an important factor for wellbeing in Kolari. On a general level, the informants were satisfied with the leisure activities on offer. The positive examples mentioned include various sport possibilities, which range from downhill skiing to skidoo-driving, and from active soccer, hunting and ice-hockey clubs to the possibility to perform circus art. In addition, there are possibilities to attend a variety of music classes. Some young people also actively engaged in sports activities outside of their municipality borders. For example, some dance classes were provided in the neighbouring municipality of Kitilä, while the circus activities and soccer attracted the youth in Kolari. However, the main consideration was whether transportation could be organized enabling the young people to take advantage of these options as one participant said:

This is the only place we have been living at so far, so we can’t really miss something that we have never had. I am satisfied with what we have, and we have plenty of activities to choose from. The question is how we can organize transportation to and from the places.

As the above excerpt shows, the issue of transportation came up often when the young people described their everyday activities. If young people want to go to the movies, for example, they need to drive about two hours to Rovaniemi. Interestingly, young people do not regard the distances as such an issue if there is a way get where they want to go. There is a clear distinction between those who are dependent on other people to drive them and those who own a vehicle. The young people who have access to a vehicle did not regard the distances as a problem, while those without access to a vehicle more often had feelings of “being stuck”. The issues of insufficient public transportation were raised throughout conversations and interviews as a decisive element of living in a rural area. Young people value independence and want to be able to move between places on their own. Having to rely on a what is a scanty public transportation system creates the negative feeling of being “dependent” on other people.

According to the Finnish Driving License Act (Ajokorttilaki 286/2011) (Finlex 2021) young people can get a driver’s license as early as the age of 17 under “special circumstances”, which include living in rural places. This law has been well received by local youth and it is applicable to almost every young person living in the Kolari area. However, getting a driver’s license is also a financial consideration and not everyone can afford to get a license and a car. For some, the current transportation, which is inadequate, hampers their lives to the extent that they want to move to a bigger city, as explained by a young man who had moved to Rovaniemi:

I used to live quite far outside of Kolari's city centre, literally in the middle of nowhere. Of course, there were outdoor activities but otherwise it was so boring. All my friends lived far away, and it was hard to get to their place. My parents or a friend's parents needed to drive us kids, which was not too easy. Sometimes we travelled with the school buses, stayed overnight at the friend's place and went back to school together on the next day. But it was not an easy way to get around.

What sets living close to a tourist destination apart from other rural places is the variety of restaurants and bars the tourism area offers. However, these are often expensive locations that young people do not find particularly attractive or affordable. During the winter season, several famous musicians and artists come to the tourism villages, but for the local youth the issues of cost and transport are still an overriding factor. The tourist area is located around 35 km from the centre of Kolari, with no public transportation allowing young people to travel back and forth between their homes and the tourism hotspots.

“Something to do” was often the answer when we asked young people what they want to have in their municipality. Even though they expressed satisfaction overall with the free-time activities offered, they said that some additional sports activities, such as dance classes, a swimming hall or a frisbee golf course, would add to their happiness. In their narratives young people noted wistfully that there had previously been more shops and places to hang out in town, such as a kiosk and a pizzeria, but that these had closed because of financial difficulties. Then again, young people understand why it is uneconomical to run a business in Kolari given the small population, especially the number of young residents.

A “dead place” and a place of “beloved nature”

While some young people view Kolari as “a dead place with only little to do”, others view it as a safe environment with “great access to nature activities”. According to Anne Ollila (2008), young people's migration tendencies in Finland are shaped by discourses that associate rural areas with impending marginalization and urban settlements with success. But “peripheries” have a number of meanings. For example, Finnish rural areas are associated with closeness to nature and safety, but also with conservatism and stagnation. Urban areas are associated with individuality and endless possibilities, but also with loneliness and insecurity (for the full list, see Tuhkunen 2007, p. 155). These perceptions were shared by our informants.

Studies have shown that rural youth may have strong bonds to their home places and often enjoy their rural lives, especially the close connection to nature, regardless of their decision to move away (Armila et al. 2016; Farrugia 2016; Kiilakoski 2016; Penttinen 2016; Tuuva-Hongisto, Pöysä and Armila 2016; Rönnlund 2019, p. 2). A connection to nature plays a big role in the youth's personal wellbeing in our study area and young people described how

important it was to just have access to nature, even if they did not always actively make use of it. For some people, access to the specific kind of nature found in the North was the reason to return to Kolari. During the fieldwork we heard extensive descriptions of the surrounding nature: the calming aspect of nature, the beauty, magic, roughness and harsh weather conditions. Nature was described as an energizing and nurturing place. It was the connection to nature that young people missed if they had lived elsewhere. They described how the forests in the southern parts of the country were different and how the feeling of space was lacking when compared to their rural home area, as this young man pointed out:

The forest is different in the south. I don't know how to explain it but it just feels very different than here. The trees are different and so is the sense of space.

Nevertheless, researchers have pointed out that young people do not leave their home regions only because they are forced to do so, but also because of dissatisfaction with their current rural lives and their longing for city life (Pedersen and Gram 2018, p. 630). Some of our research participants said that their longing for “something different” is so strong that as soon as they could, they would move away. One young man said:

Mainly I wanted to get away because there was not much to do ... it's a dead place. Did you see the centre? There used to be a few more shops but everything is closed now, except for the two grocery stores and one burger grill.

Urban lifestyle itself can be perceived as something worth pursuing, especially by young people (Penttinen 2016, pp. 149–150). David Farrugia has argued that with their opportunities for consumption and leisure experiences, cities may attract young people by being symbols of modern life and youth culture. Compared to the perceived possibilities offered by cities, rural places may come to be seen as places where “nothing happens” (Farrugia 2016). The experience of the good life is also to some degree relative and results from a comparison between what one has and what others have. Research on stress, for example, has shown that feeling that one does not have enough or *as much as others* is as a major psycho-social stressor (Sapolsky 2004, pp. 372–374). In our case study, dissatisfaction with rural life seems, at times, to have arisen from comparing one's life to what life was imagined to be like elsewhere.

If one's hometown is perceived as a “dead place”, moving away is essential to ensure a future for oneself. Migration may offer a way to escape marginal conditions and to actively better one's life. The young people in our case study had clear visions or a direction for their life goals, informing their decision to either stay or leave. In this respect, youth outmigration is an expression of the ability to dream of a better future (Fischer 2014) as well as of the

feeling of being able to control the direction of one's life, both of which are important aspects of one's sense of wellbeing (Jankowiak 2009).

Conclusions

In this chapter we have been exploring the role of mobility in young people's wellbeing in northern Finland. Our results suggest that the ability to be mobile is necessary for the wellbeing of young people in rural areas, whose lives are characterized by long distances. The importance of mobility is highlighted also when its counterpart, the inability or refusal to move, results in feelings and accusations of being "stuck". It was common that to access the things they perceived to be most important for their wellbeing—social relations, meaningful activities and work—the young people interviewed needed to be mobile either within or between localities. It is important to point out that for our informants it was not long distances per se that were perceived as a problem, but access to the transportation needed to travel those distances. While previous research on rural youth has discussed the role of long distances in young people's everyday lives, this research is the first attempt to spell out how mobility is connected to young people's wellbeing in sparsely populated rural areas.

In light of our findings, we would also argue that the phenomenon of Finnish rural youth outmigration can be understood as an example of a prevailing culture of migration. In this context, a young person "needs" to leave his or her birthplace to be able to fully pursue the good life in modern Western society, which values individualism and mobility. Discussions of rural youth outmigration often deal with the clash between individual pursuit of wellbeing and the viability and wellbeing of the rural communities affected. Our decision to focus on young people's viewpoints has shown that while rural youth outmigration may have negative impacts on the community level, on the individual level it may be a way for a young person to better his or her life. Migration may offer the means for a young person to pursue his or her dreams or to escape marginal conditions. At the same time, it is important to note that some of the young people interviewed in the present study dreamed of being able to stay in their home region. For them too, mobility could offer the means to realize this dream by leaving their birthplace temporarily to get qualifications that would allow them to come back. While the young people under 18 years often wanted to leave, returning seemed to be the most attractive option for young families and the "older" youth who had already acquired an education.

Account of our study, we have seen that the same considerations can serve as push and pull factors, with no straightforward causation between place characteristics and wellbeing. Our findings support the argument of Thin (2016) that wellbeing should be understood as the result of people's dynamic interactions with places rather than of people having access to certain place characteristics. We extend the argument to the context of rural youth outmigration and demonstrate the key role that various mobilities play in the lives

of young people in rural areas. With this chapter we hope to have done justice to young people’s multivocal views on wellbeing and the importance of mobility in northern Finland.

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Notes

- 1 Our definition reflects the highly individualistic culture in Finland. In some other cultural and geographical settings, migration is understood more as a collective decision, as discussed by Alla Bolotova in her chapter on Russia in this volume.
- 2 In 2016, more than three of four respondents on a survey were prepared to move to get a job, while nearly half would be fully ready to do so (Valtion nuorisoneuvosto 2016). That same year, among the EU countries Finland had the third highest number of young working-aged people to move within the country for a job (Palen and Lien 2018). Another survey reported that at the time the research was done, 81 per cent of the respondents, young Finnish people, were planning to move to another region (Tuhkunen 2007, pp. 10, 145–146).
- 3 Migration was most frequent between the ages of 15 and 21 (Moisio et al. 2016, pp. 34–35).
- 4 Currently, the average age at which children leave the parental home in Finland is 22 years (Karlsdóttir, Heleniak and Kull, 2020, p. 34).
- 5 As examples Thin mentions long-term ascetic withdrawals and the Indian custom whereby newlywed women are ritually assisted to leave their old homes and to embrace their new ones (2016, p. 11).
- 6 These rankings are based on measurements such as life expectancy at birth, education and gross national income per capita.
- 7 Forty-eight per cent of the municipality’s economy and 40 per cent of employment came from tourism in 2011 (Matkailun tutkimus- ja koulutusinstituutti 2013).
- 8 It has the fourth-largest annual revenue of all the ski resorts in Finland (Jänkälä 2019).
- 9 The park, which recorded 561,200 visitors in 2019, is the most popular national park in Finland (Metsähallitus 2019).
- 10 The excerpts have been translated by the authors from Finnish.

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