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Marginalisation through the eyes of the othered: Young adults choosing to live in rural Northern Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen increasing debate and research into identity and belonging in rural areas. The northernmost region of Sweden, Norrland, has been identified as the rural internal other to the modern, progressive, youthful and urban Swedish state (Eriksson, 2008). Young adults are underrepresented in and often expected to leave small municipalities, but an increasing body of international research focuses on rural stayers. This study aims to investigate how young adults choosing to live in rural Northern Sweden negotiate their identity in relation to representations and Othering of Norrland and the rural. The research is based on eleven semi-structured interviews with people between 19 and 25 years old living in the counties of Norrbotten, Västerbotten and Västernorrland. The findings show that young adults are aware of prejudice and negative representations surrounding their localities. These representations are approached in different ways, either seen as true, upsetting or irrelevant. The concept of Norrland was often understood as oppressive, prejudiced or one-dimensional when used by people who do not live there. Participants perceive that they and their places do not matter to authorities at any political level and worry about losing access to public services. As an effect of stigmatisation and generalisation of rural Norrland, injustice was seen as natural and difficult to complain about. These findings are important as they give voice to people who are often made invisible and because it shows alternative reactions to rural marginalisation than radicalisation.

1. Introduction

When small town voters were identified as the foundation of Trump's US presidency victory in 2016 (Berlet and Sunshine, 2019), rural issues reached public debate in Sweden (Svensson, 2017a). In the Swedish context, a prevalent urban norm leads to the urban being seen as a natural positive default (Rönblom, 2014). The five northern-most counties of Sweden, Norrland, have a sparse, uneven population and Eriksson (2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) has argued that it is subject to internal orientalism and Othered to enforce the progressive, modern, and urban identity of southern Sweden.

Youth are often expected to move from rural locations to make something of themselves in the city, in Sweden (Svensson, 2006) and across Europe (Woods, 2011). Consequently, young adults in rural locations are often excluded or made invisible in local development (Svensson, 2011, 2016, Ungdomsstyrelsen et al., 2010). This paper attempts to give voice to often-invisible young adults who have chosen to live in rural Norrland and investigate how they experience discourses and ideas surrounding Norrland and the rural. While previous Swedish

and international research has focused on moving intentions of school leavers (Rönnlund, 2020; Forsberg, 2019, Rye, 2006), those who have left (Eriksson, 2017) or returnees (Rauhut and Littke, 2016), this project adds to the rarer literature on young adults living in rural areas (Svensson, 2016; Stenbacka et al., 2018, Cooke and Petersen., 2019). It also aims to investigate whether and how discourses around Norrland and the rural identified by Eriksson (2008) and Stenbacka (2011) affect young adults in such spaces.

The broad research question 'How do young adults in rural Norrland negotiate their identity in relation to perceived representations of the North and the rural?' can be broken down into two sub-questions answered in this paper. Firstly, how do young adults perceive Norrland and the rural to be depicted? Secondly, how do young adults feel affected by such representations?

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2. Literature review

2.1. Representing the rural

Representations give meaning to different ways of life through producing values and beliefs (Crang, 1998), and seem natural and pre-given through their continuous repetition (Cloke, 2014). Identities of people and place are mutually constituted, with place representations assumed to represent inhabitants (Eriksson, 2017). Places are partly understood through representations combining into wider patterns of discourse. Popular discourses are intentionally created through cultural structures designed to reach an audience, but lay discourses refer to people's conscious and unconscious understandings communicated between or within individuals (Jones, 1995). Both types of discourses contribute to general understandings of places, peoples and issues.

Understanding of rural spaces vary across cultural and temporal contexts. Worldwide, rurality is often represented as idyllic, with desirable, slow-paced lifestyles within close-knit communities (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012). This relates to portrayals of rural dull as traditionalist, boring, backwards, lacking skilled job opportunities and having strong social control (Rye, 2006). Notions of rural dull and rural idyll can be held simultaneously by the same people, particularly among adolescents in rural areas (Rye, 2006). However, the urban norm is more useful for conceptualising this article. Rurality is often defined by what urbanity is not (Waara, 2011). Rönnblom, 2014 argues that in Sweden, a prevalent urban norm positions urban places as normal and ideal spaces of development and activity, with rural places as their opposite. With urbanity as the ideal, rural places are measured on how they can become more like the urban, and rural issues are not politicised in their own right, making solutions difficult to achieve (Rönnblom, 2014). Organisations like Rural Sweden use the concept of urban norm to question how urbanity is seen as a national ideal, measure of success and natural outcome to strive for (Holdo, 2020). Conceptualising the discourses of this article through the theoretical framework of the urban norm focuses attention on power dynamics and assumed opposition between socially constructed urbanity and rurality.

2.2. Governing the rural

Boundaries of core and periphery are discursively produced (Willett, 2020) and originate in a belief that positive social change is connected to development, with decline as its opposite (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann, 2013). Western states have shifted towards governing through communities, putting emphasis on active citizens taking responsibility for improving their local community (Jones et al., 2004). Local governments are increasingly focusing on central or growing places within the municipality, and withdrawing from places with low population density, leaving traditional state responsibilities to local communities and volunteers (Meijer and Syssner, 2017; Leibert, 2013; Woolvin et al., 2015). Citizens may then experience constant decline in services despite fulfilling the same citizenship obligations as urban populations that continue to receive those services (Lundgren and Nilsson, 2018). By saying that place development has not been successful enough, decline is often blamed on inhabitants (Bürk, 2013). When population decline is considered a local failure despite national and international causes, this creates stigmatisation of rural issues (Svensson, 2017b).

Europe and the US have seen a surge in populist movements, often driven by elites in places where people feel left behind (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Stigmatisation and place-based stereotypes affect groups differently where local elites may feel angry or targeted, while others can be sarcastic, or ignore it (Bürk, 2013). Among hunters in rural southern Sweden, a populist right-wing movement has formed based on the experience that a hegemony of urban elites out of touch with countryside conditions, including environmentalists, conservationists and animal rights activists, have united against rural issues (von Essen and Allen, 2017). Similarly, rural youth in Britain sometimes distrust

politicians as they perceive them to hold urban perspectives (Leyshon, 2008). This paper will investigate how young adults who have currently chosen to live in rural Norrland perceive representations of Norrland and what strategies they employ to deal with this.

2.3. Norrland

Norrland is the northern-most part of Sweden, covering 58 percent of the country's area (Borgegård, 2002), with about 1.2 million inhabitants (Website), including five counties and fifty-four municipalities (Eriksson, 2008), see Fig. 1. The population is mostly concentrated to the larger coastal cities. Norrland also has some of the most sparsely populated municipalities in the country. This results in diverse and complicated spaces. While counties and municipalities of Norrland are administrative and political regions, with their own distinct cultures, Norrland itself may be understood as a cultural region with borders conceived differently depending on circumstances and positionality.

Norrland is part of the traditional Sami land, Sápmi, spanning Northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Russian Kola Peninsula (Öhman, 2016). Sweden has a long history of racializing and discriminating the Sami, through for example forced moves, forced schooling, unequal housing and education access, land-grabbing and attempting to exterminate Sami languages (Cocq, 2014; Balto and Østmo, 2012). The Sami population in Sweden is estimated to between 20 000–40 000 people, though it is difficult to know how many people self-identify as Sami (Sametinget, 2022), the Sami are a minority within Norrland.

The concept of Norrland can be a source of discontent to its

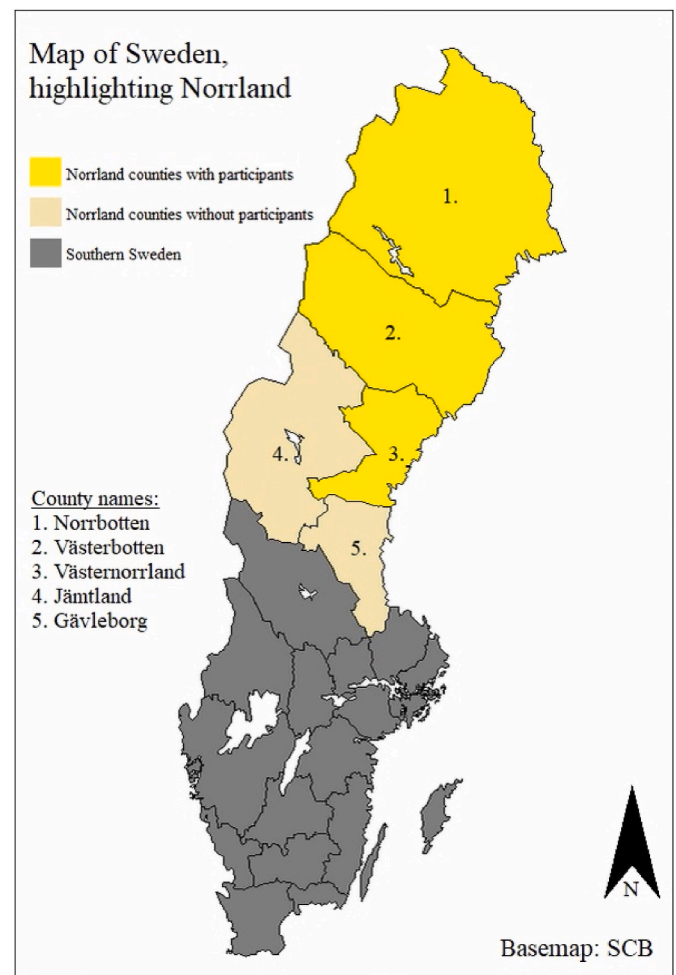


Fig. 1. Map of Norrland.

inhabitants (Eriksson, 2008), as it becomes a summative statement where a large area is generalised and its population seen as homogenous (Said, 1978). Using Norrland as a point of departure for analysis can be controversial. However, when examining the consequences of representations, Norrland is useful due to how representations are often framed in relation to Norrland rather than its constituent parts (Eriksson, 2008; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015). This paper recognises Norrland as a complex, heterogeneous area with multiple different characteristics, peoples and cultural practices. Imaginations of Norrland are culturally and socially constructed, meaning they are not necessarily anchored in reality.

When a region is continuously and rigorously represented as subordinate and holding oppositional characteristics to a hegemonic core, this can be termed internal orientalism (Eriksson, 2010a). Eriksson's (2008, 2017, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) work shows how Norrland is constructed as an exotic Other to the modern, progressive and egalitarian Swedish self-image through media, political and lay discourses. Politically, Norrland is often portrayed as a problem with underused resources (Nilsson and Lundgren, 2018), and assumed to be synonymous with rural (Eriksson, 2008; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015). Popular representations present Norrland as the depopulating, backward, rural and traditional other, to enforce Swedish national identity (Eriksson, 2008). The conflation of Norrland and rural in combination with the urban norm reinforce the Othering of Norrland. However, Willett (2020) argues that research plays an important role in producing discursive space where peripheral places and people can use their own agency to produce purpose-built forms of development and question ideas produced by the metropolis. This is an important objective of this research.

2.4. Youth, life and migration

Identity incorporates how people understand themselves and are understood by others, so the relevance of different aspects of a person's identity depends on place, time, audience and context (Jackson, 2014). Being categorised is not always voluntary, but continuously being identified by others as belonging to a certain group can create a sense of sameness among those excluded in similar ways (Young, 1990). Politically, identities are often produced on a national scale, but can also co-exist with or be replaced by other scales (Cresswell, 2004). In some situations, regional identity may be defined directly in opposition to national identity, as holding distinctively different characteristics in a way that helps to reinforce geographical imaginations of national identity (Jansson, 2003; 2005).

Migration patterns are often connected to the life-course, partly associated to age, but mostly related to life-stages where transitioning to adulthood and pursuing education and job opportunities make young adults the largest group of out-migrants from rural areas (Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016). Rural and urban areas are associated with particular elements of the life-stage, with the rural connected to family formation and settling down while youth is associated with urbanity (Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016).

Dominant discourses tend to view migration through a binary lens of leaving or staying, particularly in relation to youth, who are expected to leave or be left behind (Boström and Dalin, 2018), with staying representing the opposite of reaching career ambitions and getting educated (Waara, 2011). While housing and opportunities in potential destinations are sometimes seen as the only limiting factor in moves from rural areas (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), international research shows that many young people make active decisions to stay in rural areas (Dufhues et al., 2021; Cooke and Petersen., 2019; Svensson, 2017a; Svensson, 2017b). This study takes a similar approach to staying as Haartsen and Stockdale (2018), defining stayers as people who build and maintain their life in an area through processes of home-making and place attachments; stayers are not necessarily people who do not move or who have always lived where they do. Recognising staying as an active decision is a powerful tool in countering urban norms and expectations that young adults will

leave rural areas.

Reasons young people may feel forced or expected to move away from rural areas include searching for jobs, education and housing (Ní Laoire, 2000; Woods, 2011; Stenbacka et al., 2018). Sense of influence might also affect moving intentions. The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2018 found that youth aged 16–25 are unlikely to feel included in Sweden, with rural youth feeling the most excluded and more likely to feel included in their immediate local area than within the municipality. Furthermore, rural youth are less likely to feel needed in society and negative perceptions of their places decrease their sense of belonging and being an equal part in the region and country (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2018). Reactions include feeling hopeless and looked down upon or wanting to prove the prejudice wrong (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2018). Svensson (2011) found that municipal leaders assume that young adults who stay in smaller municipalities are unambitious and uninterested in getting politically involved. There are also differences between how older generations and young adults engage in politics (Weiss, 2020), so political efforts involving young adults may have varying success (Svensson, 2016).

Among Swedish youth, moving intentions and place connections coincide with class and gender. It is well-documented that women are more likely to leave rural areas and causes might include masculinist cultures (Rauhut and Littke, 2016), or women doing better in the education system (Leibert, 2016; Woods, 2011). Expecting youth to want to see the world (Cooke and Petersen., 2019; Waara, 2011; Svensson, 2017b), can be a middle-class understanding of life purposes (Svensson, 2011). While middle-class prospects may be improved by moving, working-class individuals are likely to be worse off in the city unless they get higher education, and many working-class youth see value in staying (Svensson, 2011). Generally, boys tend to be more strongly connected to their home municipalities (Waara, 2011; Boström and Dalin, 2018), but middle-class boys see their dream job through education while working-class boys often want quick labour-market establishment (Svensson, 2011). Working-class girls do not always expect smooth transitions into working life (Forsberg, 2019), but sometimes venture into male-dominated sectors to stay in rural areas (Stenbacka et al., 2018). Middle-class girls often focus on education and self-development opportunities in the city (Waara, 2011) and see moving as an end in itself (Svensson, 2011).

3. Methods

The data consists of eleven semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2019 with young adults aged 19–25 years. Four participants lived in Västerbotten, two in Västernorrland and five in Norrbotten, although one of them had recently moved and therefore mostly answered for Västernorrland (see Fig. 1 and Table 1). Three were men and four women. The method was chosen due to the potential to get rich and nuanced accounts of emotion and experience (Hoggart et al., 2002),

Table 1
Participant details: pseudonym, residence, gender and age.

Name	Gender	Age	County	Place of residence
Sonja	Woman	19	Västernorrland	Central town ~6800 inhabitants
Ivar	Man	20	Västernorrland	Village less than 500 inhabitants
Anna	Woman	24	Västerbotten	Village less than 200 inhabitants
Emma	Woman	22	Västerbotten	Village ~100 inhabitants
Agda	Woman	19	Västerbotten	Village ~100 inhabitants
Selma	Woman	24	Västerbotten	Village less than 200 inhabitants
Erik	Man	25	Norrbotten	Village ~1200 inhabitants
Mercedes	Woman	19	Norrbotten	Central town ~23 300 inhabitants
Alexandra	Woman	21	Norrbotten	Village ~350 inhabitants
Ari	Woman	19	Norrbotten	Central town ~7000 inhabitants
Alexander	Man	23	Norrbotten	Village ~100 inhabitants
			Västernorrland	Village ~1900 inhabitants

concerning the topics of rurality, Norrland, belonging and citizenship. All interviews were conducted in Swedish.

A pilot interview was conducted, leading to the development of 23 questions related to six themes: identity, home, politics, images of Norrland and the rural and services. To gain an understanding of identity, participants were asked to describe themselves, their age, gender, occupation, home and migration history. There was no direct question on socio-economic class. The theme of politics started from questions around understandings of politics and voting behaviour. The questions used to understand discourses on Norrland and the rural were phrased as: “How do you perceive the understanding of the countryside/Norrland?”, “How do you perceive [county] to be understood in media (literature, film, music, news)?”, “What do you think of the concept Norrland” and “How do you perceive Norrland to be used in the media?”. The point was for participants to explain what ideas and discourses they had come into contact with and their thoughts on these. The interviews ended with a discussion about services and hopes for the future, to gain an understanding of their current situation and satisfaction.

3.1. Selection criteria

The age group 19–25 was selected because people between 13 and 25 are considered youth in Sweden (Waara, 2011), and most people finish school the year they turn 19 and have to decide on next steps. One participant, Sonja (see Table 1), was a refugee and therefore still in school at 19, but her perspective is valuable as part of a larger group of young refugees in rural Sweden. The inclusion criteria were being within the desired age group and living in a rural location in Norrland. I was reluctant to define rurality as the not-urban, which could contribute to the urban norm. This, however, made selection trickier, especially in connection with the predominant idea of Norrland as a rural place (see Eriksson, 2008). Highlighting this rural self-imagination, I chose to include an interview with someone living in a larger town of about 20 000 inhabitants. Furthermore, I include two people living in central towns of small municipalities, because those places encounter similar issues to other rural locations.

Participants included people who had grown up where they were currently living, people who had returned and people who had moved into their current area, sometimes from cities and sometimes from other rural locations. Mobility of participants was notable with all but one having moved or intending to move within the previous/next two years, connecting to the mobility of youth across Europe (Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016).

Initially, I intended to meet all participants in person and limit the study area to Västerbotten. However, recruiting participants was more challenging than expected and in practice, I was unable to travel even across Västerbotten. The practical limits of the target population led me to broaden the scope to all counties of Norrland as well as do digital interviews. Ari, Selma, Mercedes, Alexander and Ivar (see Table 1) were interviewed via phone. Alexandra, Erik, Anna, Agda and Emma were interviewed in their respective homes and Sonja was interviewed in a café. There is always a tension of power between researcher and researched, and holding interviews where participants feel comfortable, such as their home could disrupt this power hierarchy (Elwood and Martin, 2000).

Six participants were recruited through my existing network and snowballing. Four interviewees were recommended through the study association SV. One interviewee was recommended by a former leader of a youth political party known for rural issues. In total, I interviewed two friends and two acquaintances and two are part of my extended network. In some cases, the intermediation by people I asked for contacts allowed me to become somewhat ‘accounted for’ by association with someone known and trusted. With participants that I knew, it is possible that helping out by being interviewed was seen as a form of friendship obligation (Cui, 2015), but declining to participate may also have been

easier due to a pre-existing reciprocal relationship. When the interviewer and interviewee are not previously acquainted, the depth of information may only be at the surface of views held by participants (Hoggart et al., 2002). Acquaintances, however, may have previous knowledge of my views, leading them to emphasise or withhold particular ideas. Interviews always included questions on background details, regardless of pre-existing relationship. I attempted to protect the integrity of acquaintances by trying to base analysis on the transcripts without including information they might have wished to exclude from the research. All interviewees signed consent forms and the research was approved through the Aberystwyth University ethics procedure.

3.2. Positionality

While identities vary based on audience, time and situation (Jackson, 2014) and complete understanding of positionality is not possible (Rose, 1997), some aspects of my identity are relevant to the study. I am female, Swedish, Northern, and identify with Norrland, Västerbotten and the rural. I lived much of my life in a village of 3000 people, within the municipality of, and 20 km from Umeå, the biggest city in Norrland. I also spent one year in the university city of Luleå in Norrbotten. At the time of the interviews, I was 21 years old. My background is in the well-educated middle-class, with university education in Wales. These positions as well as my varying relationship to participants placed me on a sliding scale from insider to outsider depending on the interview.

This work, like much previous work on Northern Sweden creates a specific imagery around Norrland, contributing to its socio-cultural construction. Representing Norrland from the outside as in this paper, despite aiming to give voice to residents, can reproduce structures of taking the power of representation away from those being represented. The representations of Norrland offered in this paper necessarily provides a partial and limited understanding of what Norrland could mean. Still, the inclusion of a range of young adults from diverse parts of rural Norrland and the commonalities and differences in their accounts, might show the significance of Norrland as a socio-cultural area.

3.3. Coding and interpretation

All interviews were recorded. All interviews, except one, were transcribed in full. One recording had an issue, so notes, memory and additional information from the participant were used. Transcripts were then read, re-read and coded using descriptive codes referring to words or phrases appearing in the text and analytic codes which connected descriptive codes to the broader literature (Cope and Kurtz, 2016). Codes were not based on any predetermined framework. Following coding, the data was ordered into themes based on its fit with the overall aims of the research.

4. Analysis

The analysis is divided into two sections. First, introducing discourses about Norrland and the rural that participants identified. Second, concerning participant relationships to the state and sense of power over their own lives.

4.1. Othering of Norrland and the rural

This section is divided into six parts, based on the broad discourses perceived by participants: Norrland as Place, an Empty Idyll, the Dying Countryside, a Place for the Crazy and Unambitious, Traditional Values and Sami Lands.

4.1.1. Norrland as place

Norrland itself was interpreted as what Said (1978) calls a summative statement, where a large area is reduced to a single homogenous meaning. Several participants argued that they did not want people from

outside Norrland (or sometimes anyone) to use the term. Anna argued that it is a matter of justice and knowledge:

“Southerners [laughs] they’re not allowed to use the word Norrland, I think, because ... most people I don’t think understand, that it’s huge and that people are different and that it’s different in all places. And then it becomes prejudiced to talk about [short pause] about that entire area as a group”

This implies that discussing Norrland without full understanding takes the voice and right of interpretation away from those who inhabit and are marginalised within the space. Instead, power lies with those who define Norrland’s borders and discuss it. The quote also shows an uncritical reference to Southerners, which were not uncommon and often specifically associated with Stockholm (see Forsberg, 2019). One way of dealing with perceived Othering of Norrland is then to generalise those seen as outsiders. The generality of Norrland made it difficult to speak of place-specific issues. This was most clearly expressed by Alexander:

“Norrland in itself is a place, like it ... being no difference between Söderhamn and Luleå or Östersund or Umeå, but it’s like Norrland, I have gone to Norrland, I haven’t gone to [pause] Umeå”

This was seen as very frustrating, hiding the diversity of conditions and cultures in Norrland.

Participants who did not take issue with the use of the word Norrland, instead had alternative understandings of the geographical area constituting ‘real Norrland’. This ranged from excluding the most southern county, Gävleborg, to excluding everything but Norrbotten and Västerbotten. Emma, Selma and Erik associated ‘proper Norrland’ with sparse populations and the mountain range in the west. In limiting its size, meanings and places included in Norrland are geographically closer and perceived to have more in common. Both arguments then strive to avoid the homogenisation and stereotyping associated with Norrland.

When Norrland as a homogenous place is seen as the other to urban, modern Sweden (Eriksson, 2010a), it is assumed to be entirely rural. This was emphasised by Anna whose high-school classmates in southern Sweden had asked questions such as how she could get to school in winter. Her answer was always that she came from a city. Furthermore, she thought fellow students from southern Sweden were surprised to find a city similar to other Swedish cities when attending university in the North. These examples also show how a Northern identity can be produced through encounters where people question things that seem obvious to the participant.

4.1.2. Empty idyll

The rural was sometimes referred to as a romanticised idyll, where things are calm, beautiful, real and there is time to think (Cloke, 2014). Selma who worked in agriculture described it as:

“it’s quiet and it’s calm and it’s, it’s for real, in some way. Eeh, and you care for what you have”

The calm countryside was compared to stress in bigger cities. However, Selma did not uncritically consider rural idyll imagery as true or key to understanding her place and life, instead, she felt that some people only saw romantic countryside without challenges. Alexander suggested that idyllic understandings were largely held by big-city people with relatives or positive short-term experiences of the countryside, but most participants thought anyone could hold this view.

Importantly, while participants themselves thought or had encountered understandings of the countryside as idyllic, this was never the case for Norrland. Instead, participants felt it was seen as an empty natural landscape with animals and snowmobiles, but lacking people. This connects to colonial representations of Norrland, as empty land needing capitalist exploitation, disregarding the existence and livelihoods of the indigenous Sami (Naum, 2016), as well as other people. For example, Sonja was asked about polar bears despite there being no polar

bears on the Scandinavian peninsula:

“When you go out for a walk, do you see foxes, or do you see bears, and then I tried to explain, we don’t have any polar bears, well-then they said well okay then maybe you have normal bears”

This speaks to the imagination of Norrland as lacking people and infrastructure through the assumption that wild animals roam everywhere. Sonja lives in the central town of her municipality and is therefore unlikely to see wild animals. This type of description also occurred among participants. Agda, for example, associated Norrland with snow, forests, empty land, hunting and snowmobiles.

The idyllic or landscape discourses also connected to rural Norrland as a site of recreation for urban residents. Ivar thought the countryside was often referred to in terms of tourism. Alexandra argued that Norrland is a complex space suffering from marginalisation, lack of resources and service cuts, but reduced to an empty but gorgeous natural landscape from a southern perspective. The benefit of Norrland to potential tourists or the rest of Sweden was perceived to be prioritised above the needs of inhabitants.

4.1.3. Dying countryside

In encounters, participants had been faced with imaginations of the countryside as boring, redundant and lacking options. Anna described how other students seemed to think things move in slow-motion with nothing to do and no mental stimulation as rural people only drink coffee and talk about mundane things. Mercedes clearly formulated how rural people are seen as not contributing:

“The general, view is perhaps a little that, that it’s more draining. And there’s not that many who live in the rural, that’s why it’s rural, eeh, and, that those people, have to use their cars and they don’t have any like big shot job so they don’t pay that much tax ... so one feels that they [short pause] take more than they give”

Mercedes then feels that rural people are blamed for insufficient contribution through smaller tax payments and using less cost-effective services. Swedish municipalities decide on all planning (Meijer and Syssner, 2017), set the basic tax rate and are responsible for most public services except healthcare (Löwnertz, 1983). Municipalities with smaller populations and especially with older, younger or lower-earning populations thus need higher tax rates to provide required services. Lundgren and Nilsson (2018) found that many people feel overlooked and that they do not get as much services as others despite paying (often high) taxes throughout their lives. However, few participants mentioned tax and they rather compared municipalities based on service levels.

4.1.4. Crazy and unambitious

Participants felt that Norrland and rurality, together and separately, were being systematically ridiculed. Emma mentioned a comedian putting on an accent and pretending to be rural. Emma thought the piece was ridiculing and was especially displeased with the accent sounding bad as she could not associate with it. Accents and cultures vary throughout rural Sweden and also within Norrland, but while the specific accent might accurately represent people elsewhere, the example shows how Emma feels grouped together with rural places and residents where only some will be relatable.

Anna thought rural places were ridiculed in numerous public service comedy series about urbanites visiting or moving to rural locations filled with crazy people. Studying three entertainment television shows depicting rural, and often Northern Sweden, Stenbacka (2011) found that scripting, casting and editing was based around stereotypes. These types of representations create an image that those who stay are not clever, ambitious or normal enough to leave. Sonja and Mercedes noticed in encounters that southern Swedes sometimes assume people in Norrland are less educated and able due to lacking access to infrastructure and higher education.

Ivar raised that media coverage of Norrland often includes “a lot of

journalists and the like who go there and look at like dying village". Mercedes also felt that journalists tended to travel to places and interview "someone eccentric". With a lack of media coverage in parts of rural Norrland (Nygren and Althén, 2014), interpretations are often made by travelling journalists. Previous research has documented similar understandings of media coverage among Norrlanders (Eriksson, 2010a), where people feel that they do not get to represent themselves on their own terms. Assigning negative characteristics to peripheral places is a process of stigmatisation which enables justifying decline and uneven development, through blaming it on local populations (Bürk, 2013).

4.1.5. Traditional Values

The movie *Jägarna* (the Hunters) was mentioned by almost everyone, often as the only known example of films set in Norrland. Eriksson (2010b) argues in an analysis of the film that it blurs Norrland into one place and its Northern characters are sexist, racist and homophobic men. Those who stay in rural places are portrayed as losers and those who leave as progressive and modern (Eriksson, 2010b). According to Eriksson (2010b), the characterisation of Norrland in *Jägarna* also crept into political debate where some commentators assumed it reflected reality. All participants thought it obvious that the film is not representative of reality. For example, Erik thought it depicted people from Norrbotten as tactless and society as corrupt, but his own experience was that people from smaller municipalities are friendlier. Although some participants perceive issues in Northern culture, the movie was not understood to offer any basis for discussion of lived problems.

In terms of gender, Emma thought the male characters in *Jägarna* treated women badly and that the movie was exaggerated overall. Alexandra thought that there are gendered expectations on Northerners to be confident, quiet and tough:

"This is also like, fits in with what people think that [short pause] men should be in society. But it's like that for everyone, also for women in Norrbotten. But then also that women up here eeh they should just be having babies, and it's a bit more like how it was in the past. And the men they should be out hunting and fixing with the car while women should like be at home and take care of children"

Alexandra saw these expectations as a self-fulfilling prophecy, or prejudice with some element of truth. However, for Mercedes, a film about someone moving to Norrland's inland from Southern Sweden where all village residents chopped firewood in their gardens at the same time, showed the ridiculous extent of these imaginations. The scene shows people taking care of themselves by performing a traditionally male and heavy task, thus living a life more akin to imaginations of the past with manual work, self-sufficiency and traditional gender roles. Instead, Mercedes argued that Norrlanders are just like everyone else.

4.1.6. Sami lands

Ari felt that Norrland was often depicted as Sami in popular media, assuming that all Norrlanders are Sami. Exotification and Othering of the Sami is often used to sell Norrland as a tourist destination for experiencing traditional ways of life, without regard for modern Sami lives (Eriksson, 2010a). This paints a one-dimensional image of Norrland as homogeneous, and exotic through othering its people, and making other minorities in Norrland invisible. Furthermore, while all reindeer are owned by the Sami and used for husbandry, they were frequently mentioned as assumed to be everywhere. Anna had been asked whether there were reindeer around her school and Ari if she went to school by reindeer sled.

4.2. Political engagement

This section discusses how participants reasoned around their

political influence, places, future and politics.

4.2.1. Services

None of the participants felt secure about their future. Anna was apprehensive of how her village was treated within local politics. Erik expected life in a village to be associated with higher costs and risks:

"There are those who complain about the petrol prices, but I'm not [pause] I know what I've gotten myself into [short pause] It's those things one has to count on ... I've made sure that I can afford it. To move out like this."

To him, rural life was a calculated risk, despite being relatively close (about 18 km) to the municipal centre. When Erik expects and considers natural the lack of services and increased costs of rural living, he becomes unlikely to complain about it. Simultaneously, Erik was very worried about school and day-care provision, feeling like schools might be closed anytime. Centralising is a strong municipal trend in Sweden (Meijer and Syssner, 2017) and many participants experienced threats to service provision. The closest school to Anna's village had been under threat, the school where Alexander grew up was closing and Selma worried about school rides from her village. Schools were referred to as 'closing', but other services were said to have 'disappeared', or sometimes 'removed' or 'taken'. Removed and taken, although negative, indicate an active practice, 'disappear' connotes a random and unexpected event. The active political processes of removing services, centralising, and encouraging urbanisation are produced as natural through their repetition. When centralised and urban structures are seen as the normative ideal and the urban as the place to be for ambitious individuals (Svensson, 2006), population decline or small populations become the opposite of what is desirable. Places of rural decline might then be seen as having failed to develop or become more like the city-core (see Willett, 2020). This has a stigmatising effect (Bürk, 2013) and make inhabitants feel responsible for challenges as well as unable to complain about their naturalised situation.

To feel that they matter, participants expected municipal or state presence within the entire municipality, providing basic healthcare, library and school services. Interviewees would consider moving if service provision decreased too much. Three people stood out however, Selma, Erik and Agda expected to live in their places indefinitely, with no mention of leaving, only expecting increasingly complicated lives due to diminishing service provision.

4.2.2. Talking about challenges

Many felt there was too little debate about issues and challenges in Norrland or in rural localities. Alexandra thought that Northern politicians are negative towards the rural:

"politicians I would think anyway that they are ... pretty negative to the countryside ... They only well it's only selfish of you to live in the countryside when you can live in town. Cause then we don't need to care about fixing the roads, or (short pause) eh the schools, everything can be closed"

The reference to selfishness shows how Alexandra feels blamed for the strain on municipal resources. Emma thought people from the city would rather make fun of rural residents than listen when they tried to communicate their needs. She repeatedly said that people who talk about rural places should visit, or try living there for a week, making clear that representations were so far removed from her everyday experience that she could assume that those with power of interpretation have less knowledge and experience of rural places. Emma thought attitudes of central town residents would make it difficult to argue that her village had rights to services or funds:

"well, if one started questioning [pause] more ... then I don't think it'd take long before someone'd [pause] ask but why did you move there"

While these ideas of urban lack of understanding for rurality are sometimes mirrored by far-right movements, such as in the case of Swedish Hunters (von Essen and Allen, 2017), Emma thought people rather questioned silently, only protesting or complaining when absolutely necessary. Emma herself tried to improve the situation by giving her village a good reputation, which would justify its right to exist. Similarly, Selma repeated the narrative of her municipality as prosperous and municipal politics working well, despite cuts to schools and her unhappiness with healthcare centralisation.¹ When she was asked to dream, some dissatisfaction became clear:

“It goes without saying ... that there are some things ... which the municipality, eehh, shall provide for its citizens. ... And the municipality will do it regardless of if it is, eehh, for those who live in eh, bigger, eehh, cities, eeh, as well as those who live in sparsely populated areas, eehh, and [short pause] there’s like no if, there’s only a how, how will we solve it?”

Life becomes increasingly precarious when debate is centred around *if* there is a point to local service provision and *if* rural places have a right to exist. However, when all places are understood as competing to attract incomers (Florida, 2004) or investments (Harvey, 1989) it becomes the responsibility of the municipality and its people to sell places as attractive enough, which may explain Selma’s use of the success narrative. Unattractive issues and problems can be difficult to discuss as they can be stigmatising and make the municipality seem unworthy of development. The lived experience of people in rural Norrland is ignored and obscured when falling populations are seen as a consequence of poor place-marketing, where inhabitants have failed to produce positive imagery.

4.2.3. Formal and informal participation

Most participants had voted in the 2018 general elections for national, regional and municipal levels. Those who had voted often said something like: ‘if you do not vote you have no right to complain about the results’. The majority of Swedish voters, especially women and elderly, tend to vote partly as a democratic obligation (Carlsson and Johansson-Stenman, 2010). This was common for participants who were unsure about the effect of their vote. Ari, Alexandra and Selma discussed voting for particular people to trace the elected politician and feel it was more meaningful. However, Selma struggled to trust politicians as they sometimes take a personal stance in a local issue as part of a national campaign, despite others from the same party holding different views. This is a symptom of political issues important in certain places not being politicised in party-politics or nationally debated, and supports Rönnblom, 2014 suggestion that politicising rural-urban power relations can be the start of a solution.

Agda had chosen not to vote. She felt that being only one person, her vote would make no difference. Agda also felt isolated from politics and the issues discussed, despite thinking things like car dependency made politics affect her more. She also struggled to imagine the municipality caring about the countryside or herself as a citizen:

”[countryside issues] would probably not be important to the municipality, but [short pause] important to me [sad tone]”

Agda hoped more people would move into the village so her family would not live there alone after the older generation’s death. She saw her own impact on society and politics as insignificant and the state as distant, but did not see opportunities elsewhere, mirroring findings on how working-class girls often do not see a place for themselves anywhere (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010). When Agda described herself, she focused on interests and characteristics unrelated to politics, indicating that she handled marginalisation through disengaging from politics.

¹ Healthcare is a regional and not municipal responsibility but was raised by the participant while discussing municipal politics.

This presents an alternative path of action for people subjected to rural marginalisation than the well-documented far-right populist or protest movements (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Berlet and Sunshine, 2019).

Alexander similarly did not see the countryside as mattering to authorities or media. He explained that where he grew up, instead of the municipality, a local association funded and provided activities and tended facilities. This is an increasingly common practice in rural Sweden (Meijer and Syssner, 2017). When people had to manage without the services expected by most citizens, Alexander felt his village did not matter to the municipality and expressed internal anguish over where he had to live. Even when he felt that:

“the countryside is unbeatable when it comes to housing prices ... access to nature ... and ... quality of life”

He thought living in the countryside would be impossible due to lack of services and state care. Like many middle-class youths (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010), Alexander thought he would have a better chance at influencing society and be taken seriously somewhere else. Alexander was the only participant who had made a clear-cut choice to live in cities in future, so even if it pained him to think rural places do not matter, it did not attack his livelihood. For other participants, taking such a position would have made everyday life difficult.

Instead, some participants saw it as natural for the municipality to focus on central towns with the largest populations, as there are less people and less going on in rural areas. When it is seen as reasonable for politics not to care for rural inhabitants, they become more invisible. This also enables thinking about rural places and people as subjects of cities, allowing pushing the responsibility for service access onto those who choose to live outside of cities. If centralised structures are natural, there is an assumption of decreasing services the further you come from the centre. However, since centre and periphery are constructed (Willett, 2020), its naturalisation is continuously reproduced by policy discourses and used to avoid state and municipal responsibility. Participants living in the municipal centre, Ari and Sonja, felt more content with municipal politics. Sonja said:

They do their best. So whe-when something is closed [short pause] or for example, scho-my school doesn’t get much budget, I understand that [short pause] there is no money”

Through personal connections to local politicians, she thus felt listened to and cared for in policy.

4.2.4. Reactions

Participants overall perceived representations of Norrland and rurality in media or politics to be built on stereotypes. Three strategies were used to deal with stereotypes: recognising them as true, disengaging or outright rejecting them. Ari mentioned the common belief that Norrlanders speak slowly, but saw it as true, referencing accents spoken in her area although accents vary across Norrland. Despite not feeling represented by common imagery, many disconnected from other people’s perceptions. Erik is one example:

“Yeah really I’m not that bothered. Same, people can think whatever they want about me and, well, no. One minds one’s own.”

As representations of place are often assumed to apply to its inhabitants (Eriksson, 2017), disengaging from prejudiced imaginations is a way of avoiding judgement passed on oneself. There was often a discrepancy between the representations participants encountered of them and their places, compared to their own views and experience. Even if many chose to disengage, others felt sad, betrayed, shocked or angry upon encountering this. Sonja, for example was disappointed in the media:

“it feels like media doesn’t do their responsibility ... the shock is more, towards disappointment ... it’s the third state power, so [short pause] it should be equal in all of Sweden”

This corresponds to findings by Bürk (2013) where stigmatising discourses may upset some, while others do not care or are sarcastic about it.

5. Conclusion

This paper has used rural Norrland as a case study to explore how young adults negotiate their identities in relation to representations they perceive about their places, considering both their understandings of how Norrland the rural are depicted and how they are affected by such representations. Participants mentioned themes including empty idyll, dying countryside, a place for the crazy and unambitious, conservative values and an exotic Sami land. As these discourses are identified by participant perception, rather than based on extensive media analysis, they are not necessarily reflective of the range of ideas circulating in the media, politics or society at large. However, there are some similarities between discourses identified in this study and those previously identified in media studies conducted by Eriksson (2008, 2010b) and Stenbacka (2011). Overall, participants thought the discourses misrepresentative of their own lives and experiences.

Othering was seen as a natural consequence of living in rural Northern locations, where some participants accepted that their location put them in a position of insignificance to the state at any local or national level. Concern about service provision and the state retreating away from rural areas has been seen across Europe (Leibert, 2013; Meijer and Syssner, 2017; Woolvin et al., 2015). In an international context of places competing to attract inhabitants (Florida, 2004) and investments (Harvey, 1989), focus is placed on selling the locality through positive stories, shifting political focus from the needs and wishes of current inhabitants to what would make the municipality attractive to incomers (see Svensson, 2006; 2016; 2017b). Furthermore, in the context of an urban norm, many thought it natural that attention should be paid to places of larger populations and that success and attractiveness comes from being more like the city-core (Willett, 2020; Boström and Dalin, 2018; Holdo, 2020). When Norrland is seen as the traditional, sexist Other to the modern, progressive Swedish state (Eriksson, 2010a), when the rural is seen to be in need of development, and when all of Norrland is understood as a single rural place, it becomes very difficult for inhabitants to complain about the situation. Especially, since lack of success in becoming more like the city-core or attracting incomers is often blamed on local people with a stigmatising effect (see Bürk, 2013).

Participants in the study adopted three different strategies to deal with place-based stigmatisation. One was focusing on creating a good reputation for the local area and prove its worth. A second strategy was disengaging from politics, which is common among young adults across Europe (Weiss, 2020). The final strategy was moving to a city to avoid dealing with the sense of not mattering or being listened to. However, this may leave the individual feeling that they have been forced to move and perpetuate the processes of marginalisation. All these strategies connected to a sense of powerlessness. Frequently, participants felt that those in power hold urban perspectives, lack understanding of rural circumstances and conditions and do not think rural inhabitants have the right to expect services. However, none of the young adults in the study turned to far-right or populist movements in response to these feelings (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; von Essen and Allen, 2017; Berlet and Sunshine, 2019).

This article adds to the small, but growing literature on rural stayers (Haartsen and Stockdale, 2018), through showing how young adults in rural Norrland negotiate their personal and regional identities in response to stereotyping. The specific senses of place-based stigmatisation in Norrland is derived from a unique combination of contextual factors, but the experiences and representations might resonate with other sparsely populated rural areas, and this should be explored in further research. Furthermore, it shows that while populist politics is an established response to experiences of stigmatisation and

marginalisation in othered regions, there are more complex sets of responses which should be investigated further, focusing on the impacts of place, gender, age and class.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

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