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The gendered district effect: psychosocial reasons why girls wish to leave their rural communities

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ABSTRACT

The rural youth exodus has mostly been explained with the pull of the city. In this mixed-method study, we explore whether young people also experience a push to leave the rural community due to a lack of psychosocial thriving. The quantitative analysis of the Ungdata-survey among young people aged 13–16 years ($n = $ 141,058) shows that girls imagine leaving more than boys, and also fare worse on many indicators for psychosocial well-being. There is a linear decline in girls' psychosocial well-being the less centrally they live. We call this *the gendered district effect*. Contrary to expectations, we find that rural girls without higher education aspirations are those who least want to stay in the rural community. It is likely that a lower degree of psychosocial well-being is part of the reason that more girls in rural areas wish to leave their homeplace. The qualitative analysis of the rural village of Smallville ($n = 21$) explores this, showing that girls commonly wanted to leave to escape a toxic social environment, which also offered few status-filled work opportunities in the village. The girls were more affected by the rural community's restricting social norms, leaving girls with poor self-images and the wish to leave.

Introduction

Many rural young people leave their home community to live in other places (Sano et al. 2020; Xie and Reay 2019). In Norway, this situation has reached a critical point, as the proportions of young people in rural areas will diminish compared to a growing number of elderly in the years to come (NOU 2020: 15, 2020). This may lead to a lack of workforce, most acutely in care services, and it may hamper the cultural and social cohesion for the young people who remain. It is therefore crucial to understand why young people may wish to leave their rural home. Rural youth research has been occupied with exploring this question (Gulløv and Gulløv 2020; Rye 2019). This research has primarily been on symbolic, structural and material conditions that often are seen as lacking in rural areas and the subsequent pull from urban educational institutions and labour market, as well as cultural

discourses about the city as 'more modern' and rich in opportunities for young people (Rye 2019). However, earlier studies (Ek et al. 2008; Peters et al. 2019) also find that rural young people – particularly girls and those with low socioeconomic resources – have lower psychosocial well-being compared to young people in urban areas. Such psychosocial conditions are rarely explored as a possible reason for young people's wish to stay or leave rural areas. Moreover, to our knowledge, no one has explored degrees of rurality with fine grained measures.

Using a pragmatic mixed method approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2021), we investigate here the gendered patterns in young people's wishing to stay or leave their rural homeplace in the future, and how these patterns relate to psychosocial well-being among peers. We start with a statistical analysis of the cross-national population survey Ungdata across six centrality categories, which shows a striking *gendered district effect*: There is a linear decline in girls' psychosocial well-being the less centrally they live, while for boys there are either no variations after centrality, or less marked patterns. The lower score on psychosocial indicators is more strongly related to the expectancy to leave the rural place for girls than for boys. We explore these findings further in the qualitative longitudinal analysis of young people in the rural village of 'Smallville'. Here, we see that girls who wish to leave explain this with psychosocial difficulties which make their present life difficult, and we investigate what it is about the rural community that may help explain this.

Belonging and mobility for rural young people

In order to investigate well-being in rural areas and how it is related to gendered aspirations to move, we build on the growing theoretical understanding of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006). Belonging, according to Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn (2021), implies a form of ontological security at the same time as it is about 'membership, rights and duties, forms of identification with groups or other people and with places, and the emotional and social bonds that come of feelings of being part of a larger whole' (Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021, 3). The term belonging as a theoretical tool is vast in scope and not particularly precise (Antonsich 2010), covering formal memberships and identification as well as emotional bonds to place, values, groups and communities. Here, we investigate social belonging: those aspects of belonging that have to do with connection to people, the experience of peer recognition and inclusion, and how this relates to young people's self-image and well-being.

In rural youth studies, the concept of belonging has often been seen in tandem with questions of aspiration (see e.g. Cuervo, Corbett, and White 2019; Pedersen and Gram 2018). There is a distinct value placed on mobility, ambition in work or education and agency in young people (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016). Being immobile in rural areas connotes a lack of agency and a 'stuckness' (Cuervo and Wyn 2017; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). Farrugia (2016) argues that young people in rural areas experience a 'mobility imperative', which he recognises in the literature across three dimensions: the structural, the symbolic and the non-representational, all of which are necessary frames to understand why young people would want to move. The first dimension, the structural, is linked to the economy and the labour market; these material conditions encompass the fact that although 'the rural' refers to a wide array of places, young people in rural areas grow up under somewhat different circumstances than their urban counterparts. Rural areas have different demographics, a larger working-class population and more rural industries (farming, fishing, tourism etc.) than the central areas (Wenham 2020).

Educational institutions are fewer and pursuing higher education, often also upper secondary school, mostly involves having to move to a more central area (Bæck 2019). The second dimension of the rural mobility imperative, the symbolic dimension, is linked to the cultural representations of the city as 'cool' and rural areas as 'boring' or 'backwards' for young people (Pedersen and Gram 2018). Youth identities are associated with urban places, not rural (Sørensen and Pless 2017), and the move to cities are often tied to transitioning to adulthood (Vehkalahti, Armila, and Sivenius 2021). The third dimension is the embodied and affective experience of rural living. In Farrugia's mapping, this is first and foremost related to the relation between the individual and the *place*, and the social relationships between young people in rural communities are not included.

However, belonging as an embodied and affective experience is also fundamentally a relational and interpersonal connection that exceeds the attachment to the physicality of the place itself. The interpersonal relationships for young people in rural areas have mostly been described as twofold: close-knit on the one hand, and intrusive on the other. Rosvall and Rönnlund (2019), for example, describe a dichotomous experience of growing up in rural areas – idyllic but also boring, traditional and marked by social control. Social problems are frequently found to be a pressing concern for rural young people (Jonsson et al. 2020; Phillips et al. 2013). A Scottish study (Glendinning et al. 2003) found that whereas the rural area was seen as a good place to be a child, teens described their social lives and networks as both caring and controlling. The girls in their study are the most distressed by troublesome relationships; girls describe it as 'living in a gold-fish bowl' (Glendinning et al. 2003, 141).

That gender is a vital factor to understand rural well-being is a remarkably consistent finding in rural youth studies (Bouchard and Wike 2022; Farrugia 2016). Changing structural conditions in rural areas affect the possibilities for young people. For example, growing rural unemployment have increased the vulnerability of some rural young men who stay on in the community (Paulgaard 2016), while growing demands for educational credentials drive young women to more central places (Corbett 2009). However, in addition to structural and material constraints in rural areas, research has also pointed to more traditional attitudes towards gender (Brandth 2019) and sexualities (Eggebø, Almli, and Bye 2015), as well as a 'macho culture' (Rauhut and Littke 2016) in rural communities. This side of rural culture has been argued as part of the reason why young women may welcome the 'mobility imperative' (Bloksgaard, Faber, and Hansen 2016). A Swedish study (Rauhut and Littke 2016) found that women who already have left their rural community did so partly because of weaker social ties, lack of fulfilling social networks and ambitions beyond the traditional gender roles, and 'for some, being bullied, assaulted and even sexually harassed at primary or secondary school only adds to the desire to leave' (Rauhut and Littke 2016, 308). It is likely that psychosocial conditions may also affect younger people's future horizons and their wishes to stay or leave their home community, but this has rarely been systematically studied.

Method and data

Quantitative dataset

We use data on lower secondary school students (grades 8–10, 13–15 years old) from the cross-national population survey Ungdata from the years 2017–2019 (*n* = 141,058).[1] In this

period, we have respondents from 412 of Norway's 428 municipalities. Ungdata is a national data collection system, administered by the research institute Norwegian Social Science (NOVA) and the regional Drug and Alcohol Competence Centres, with the aim of providing data about young people's life situation. The questionnaire covers topics like adolescent health, well-being, leisure time activities, as well as family, friends and school relationships. The respondents answered the questionnaire using an online digital solution during school hours. Usually, school staff administered the data collection. The response rate at lower secondary was 87% (Bakken 2019). The decision to participate is made by each municipality. There is no charge for participation as the project is financed by the Norwegian Directorate of Health.[2] In the analytic sample, we excluded all the municipalities that participated twice during the period. We also excluded participants that had missing answers on at least one of the questions used in the analyses. The net sample thus consisted of 141,058 adolescents in 291 municipalities.

The main dependent variable is based on a question about where young people believe they will live in the future: 'Can you imagine living in your local municipality when you grow up?' with the options 'Yes', 'No' and 'I don't know'. In our analyses, we coded 'No' as the value 1 and interpret it as an expectancy of leaving. The other two options are coded as 0. The main explanatory variable is based on Statistics Norway's centrality index (Høydahl 2017). This index is constructed on the basis of travel time by car to workplaces and the proximity of service functions, and has a value from 0 to 1000 for each municipality to indicate its centrality. The continuous scale is then used to distinguish between six categories from 'most central' (1) to 'least central' (6).

In addition to these variables, we include several psychosocial indicators selected on the basis of our earlier quantitative and qualitative analyses of the life situation of rural youth in Norway (Eriksen and Andersen 2021). We include two measures of social well-being. The first measure, social well-being, is a composite measure of three questions about young people's satisfaction with various aspects of their life; their friends, their school and the local community where they live. The second variable, based on the question 'I feel that I fit in with the students at my school', was used to measure respondents' subjective feeling of social inclusion. We also combine these measures and construct a three-category version of social well-being in the analysis in Figure 2 (a,b).

Two variables relate to self-image and self-perception. The first variable, self-image, is an index based on three questions: 'I am very happy with the way I am', 'I am often disappointed with myself' and 'I am satisfied with how I feel'. In addition, we used a measure where respondents expressed whether they were happy of unhappy with their physical appearance as one aspect of their life. In Figure 2 (c,d), we use these in combination to identify young people with poor, average and good self-images. In addition, we include a measure for bullying. Respondents were asked 'Are you sometimes teased, threatened or excluded by other young people at school or in your free time?' Six response options indicated the frequency of experiencing this. As earlier studies have highlighted education as a factor that can affect rural young people's desire to leave their home place, we included a dummy variable that indicate whether youth expect to attend higher education or not. All these variables are validated by earlier use in several rounds of Ungdata. Some of them are also based on instruments from other surveys. We refer to the supplementary material for more information about the variables and their coding.

In the analyses, many of the measures were standardised within the analytic sample to be able to compare their relative importance for the expectancy of moving in the future. We also include a set of control and explanatory variables. Dummy variables are used to indicate whether the year is 2017, 2018 or 2019. We also include gender as a dummy variable. Grade level is included as a continuous variable with the values 0–2, indicating the levels 8th to 10th. Lastly, we also include a measure of socio-economic resources at home (Bakken, Frøyland, and Sletten 2016) that has been developed for Ungdata.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the analytic sample, and the distribution on all the included variables. Students living in the second least and the least central municipalities are fewer than those living in more central municipalities. Respondents are fairly similarly distributed across year, gender and grade level. In the bottom half of the table, we see the distribution on different indicators of life situation and life quality. In the analyses, we mostly apply linear regression models with a dichotomous outcome, whether young people expect to leave or not. These models are therefore what are called linear probability models (Hellevik 2009). The models also examine interaction terms between several of the included variables, for instance the centrality measure and gender. Thus, we can examine whether centrality is of different importance for girls than for boys regarding various life conditions.

Qualitative dataset

Inequality in youth is an ongoing longitudinal qualitative research programme that follows the same young people over time. The programme was designed to be a qualitative companion to Ungdata and to address the same themes in young people's lives. The semi-structured and individual interviews with young people and their parents cover the young people's relational and geographical belonging, well-being, education and future plans. There are four sites included, and here we focus on the most rural one: Small-ville[3] village, situated in a municipality which is on the penultimate level of the centrality

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Observations	Mean	Min	Max
Most central	141058	17,1	0	100
Second most central	141058	26,2	0	100
Semi-central 1	141058	26,9	0	100
Semi-central 2	141058	19,5	0	100
Second least central	141058	8,7	0	100
Least central	141058	1,5	0	100
Year = 2017 (%)	141058	30,9	0	100
Year = 2018 (%)	141058	25,5	0	100
Year = 2019 (%)	141058	43,6	0	100
Gender (%girls)	137934	49,6	0	100
8th Grade (%)	141058	34,3	0	100
9th Grade (%)	141058	33,1	0	100
10th Grade (%)	141058	32,6	0	100
Socio-economic resources (SES) (3 = highest)	140867	2,1	0	3
Expecting to leave home municipality (%)	137447	18,1	0	100
Expect to attain higher education (%)	133115	61,6	0	100
Social well-being (5 = highest)	132455	4,1	1	5
Social inclusion (3 = don't fit in)	138846	0,7	0	3
Bullied- frequency (5 = every day)	138215	0,7	0	5
Self-image (3 = highest)	131424	2,0	0	3
Physical appearance (4 = most displeased)	131167	1,5	0	4

Ungdata 2017–2019. Students lower secondary.

index and where we find close to average scores on all the main indicators we investigate here. Smallville has low levels of unemployment, a mostly working-class population, and is centred around a cornerstone industry. It is a quite homogenous community with mostly white ethnic Norwegians. The young people's mothers mostly worked in the female dominated care sector with jobs like nursing or kindergarten, and their fathers mostly worked in the village industry as skilled or unskilled workers.

The respondents were recruited by the help of teachers in a lower secondary school in Smallville. They were interviewed each of the three years of lower secondary school (age 12–13 to 15–16). The first wave (autumn 2018) included ten girls and eleven boys. In the second wave (spring 2020) during the COVID-19 lockdown we intentionally recruited only half of the participants; this wave included 5 girls and 5 boys and was conducted by phone or video call. The third wave (spring 2021) included ten boys and ten girls. Although the main aim of this paper is not a longitudinal analysis of the interviews, data from all interview waves are employed in the analysis. The main topics listed above were pursued in all waves, and the interviews normally lasted for about an hour. The third wave was conducted at a time when they recently had or were about to apply for upper secondary school. There were only a few options available in the village – health programmes (female dominated) and industry programmes (male dominated) and the programme for specialisation in general studies.[4]

Analysis

Both data sets have frequently been used to explore a range of topics independently, but in this study's design and analysis, we use an integrated mixed methods approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2021). An integrated design means that the two methods 'have a conversation' with each other during the course of the study' (Greene 2007, 125); the two methods were implemented in planned interaction and with relatively equal weight, both addressing the same overarching question. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data happened from the experimental stage and throughout the research process. For the sake of clarity, we present the analysis as split between the quantitative and the qualitative analysis.

The gendered district effect

In Figure 1 (a–f), we show different outcomes and indicators of life quality among youth in different types of municipalities according to their degree of centralisation. We wish to point to two key patterns. First, the less central the municipality, the more likely that girls do not expect to live in their municipality in the future. This pattern is less pronounced among boys. Second, girls' scores on social well-being, their feelings of fitting in among peers, self-image, satisfaction with their own body and bullying are more dependent on the centrality of their municipality than for boys. For instance, girls' social well-being drops more sharply with declining centrality than what is the case for boys.

In Table 2, with eighteen regression models, we examine how the psychosocial factors are related to the expectancy to leave, and to what extent the inclusion of these changes the impact of centrality on this expectancy. All analyses are done separately for boys and
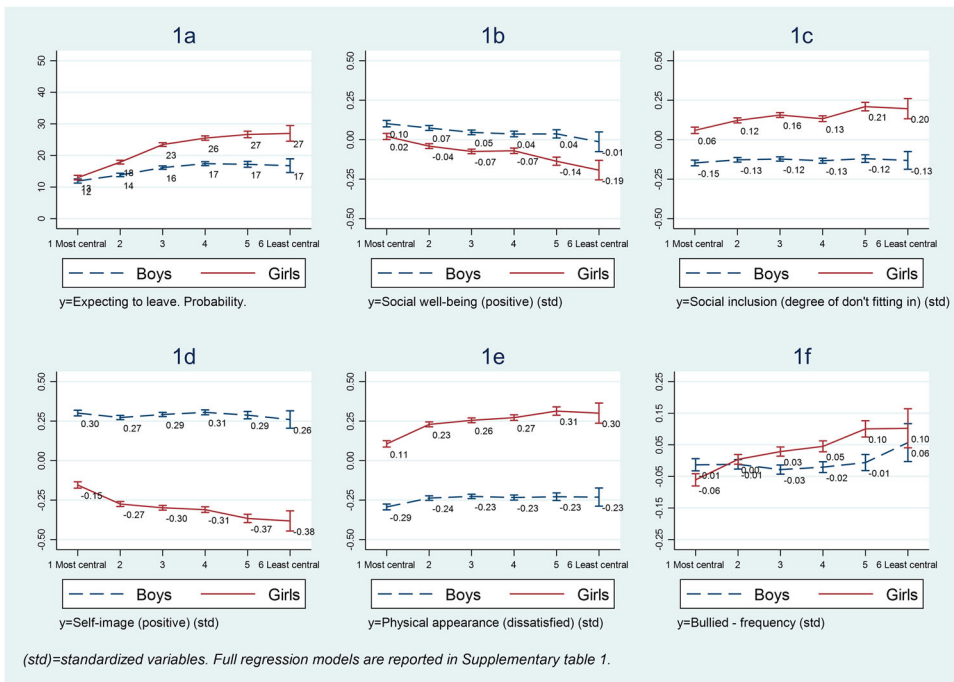
Figure 1. (a–f) Centrality dimension and various indicators of life quality among girls and boys. Ungdata 2017–2019. Students lower secondary.

girls. In model 1 (m1), we see that centrality appears to have an inversed push-effect as more young people expect to move as municipalities get less central. This effect is stronger for girls than for boys. For each step in a rural direction, 1.6 percentage points more of the boys envisage leaving their home in the future. For girls, however, the estimate is 3.8 percentage points. For models 2–9, we separately include the potentially mediating variables. For instance, in model 2, we introduce socioeconomic resources. Both for girls and boys resource level is negatively related to moving plans, but more so for girls than for boys. This variable only partially reduces the effect of centrality for girls to 3.6, while the estimate for boys remains unchanged at 1.6. Furthermore, we see that the expectancy to leave rises drops with increasing social well-being, rises with the feeling that young people do not fit in among peers, drops with improving self-image, rises with dissatisfaction own look and rises if young people are bullied. We also see that education plans play out differently for boys and girls. While such plans increase the likelihood of moving among boys, it decreases it among girls. This pattern is also found in Eriksen and Andersen (2021), in analyses of the two least central categories, also when social economic resources are controlled for. Contrary to the idea of higher education representing a pull towards leaving the rural community, neither among girls nor boys do education plans change the effect of centrality.

Except for education, the same association between psychosocial factors and moving plans are observed among both boys and girls. However, these variables are more strongly related to the expectancy to leave among girls than boys. Since the changes in the coefficients for centrality from model 1 (m1) to the following models (m2-m9)

Table 2. Young people's expectancy to leave their home municipality in the future.

	(m1)	(m2)	(m3)	(m4)	(m5)	(m6)	(m7)	(m8)	(m9)
				Social			Physical appearance		
	None	SES	Expect higher edu.	well-b.	Social inclusion	Self-image	(degree of dissatisfaction)	Bullied	All
Boys									
Centrality (inversed)	0.016***	0.016***	0.018***	0.015***	0.016***	0.016***	0.016***	0.016***	0.017***
Potential mediator		−0.011***	0.016***	−0.071***	0.051***	−0.043***	0.031***	0.032***	
R2 adj.	0.004	0.004	0.005	0.041	0.022	0.016	0.011	0.012	0.054
N	58817	58817	58817	58817	58817	58817	58817	58817	58817
Girls									
Centrality	0.038***	0.036***	0.037***	0.034***	0.036***	0.035***	0.035***	0.036***	0.034***
Potential mediator		−0.035***	−0.024***	−0.105***	0.069***	−0.067***	0.056***	0.045***	
R2 adj.	0.020	0.022	0.020	0.083	0.050	0.048	0.039	0.032	0.096
N	62095	62095	62095	62095	62095	62095	62095	62095	62095

Ungdata 2017–2019. Students lower secondary.
Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ – all models: Linear probability models with control for grade level. Name of the potential mediators are indicated in the column headings. Full regression models are reported in Supplementary tables 2a-b.
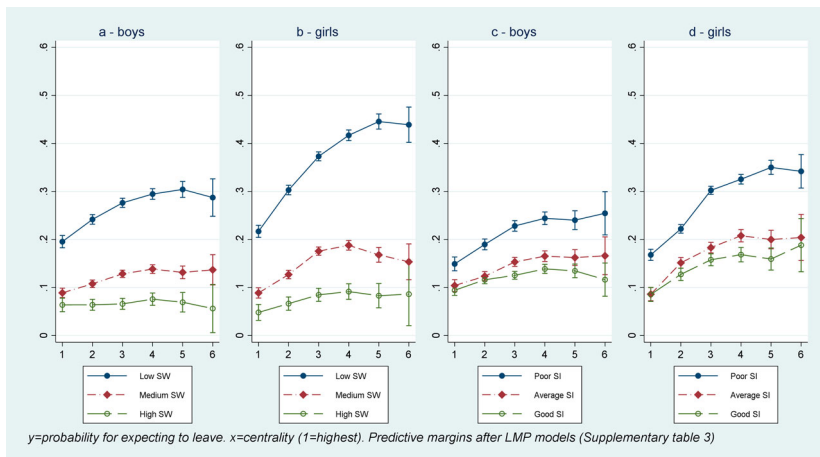
y=probability for expecting to leave. x=centrality (1=highest). Predictive margins after LMP models (Supplementary table 3)

Figure 2. (a–d) Expecting to leave after three levels of social well-being(SW) and self-image (SI), centrality and gender.

are always larger among girls, this suggests that these variables are more central for understanding, or at least more related to, girls' rather than boys' expectancy to leave. The variable that both among boys and girls largely reduces the coefficient for centrality is social well-being. One value increase in well-being (i.e. one standard deviation) reduces the probability of expecting to leave with 7.1 and 10.5 percentage points among boys and girls respectively. Inclusion of this variable reduces the centrality coefficient with 0.1 and 0.4 percentage points among boys and girls respectively, compared to model one. From this, it is also clear that the main part of the impact of centrality on the expectancy to leave remains in all models, also in the full model (m9) where all mediators are included simultaneously.

In the next step, we examine to what extent there is an interaction between centrality, gender and social well-being, as well as centrality, gender and self-image, on the expectancy for leaving. In Figure 2 (a–d), we see predictive margins, indicating the probability of planning to leave. These analyses are based on linear probability models (LPM) that are reported in Supplementary table 3. First, we examine three equally sized groups of youth with low, medium and high social well-being (SW). In Figure 2 (a), we see that the likelihood that boys with the lowest social well-being expect to leave increases with reduced centrality. In Figure 2 (b), we see that this relationship is even more pronounced among girls. In the most central areas, girls with the lowest social well-being have a probability of leaving that is around 20%, while it is more than 40% among girls in the least rural municipalities. In Figure 2 (c,d), we examine moving plans and centrality in three equally sized groups with poor, average and good self-image. The pattern regarding self-image is fairly similar to what we saw for social well-being, but the differences between the groups with varying self-image are somewhat weaker.

The quantitative analyses have shown two main patterns. First, a gendered district effect: Girls tend to score worse on many psychosocial indicators the less central their municipality. For boys, there are either no variations after centrality or less marked patterns. Secondly, lower scores on psychosocial indicators are more strongly related to the expectancy to leave for girls than for boys. These associations are stronger in the

least central areas. In the following, we will investigate some of the key mechanisms behind these patterns in our analyses of the qualitative material. First, we briefly consider the experiences and plans of those who imagine staying, then go into more depth on those who expect to leave. Lastly, we consider what it is with the rural condition that creates or maintains the gendered district effect.

Imagining the future

The boys and girls who perceived a future in the rural, industrial village of Smallville all seemed to be thriving. They had stable families, participated in team sports, and they had close friendships and active social lives. The path ahead appeared clear for them: All the seven boys who considered staying had applied for one of the technical, industrial or blue-collar VET programmes, a direction that would enable them to work in the local industry like most of their fathers, which was their aim either explicitly or an option they considered as realistic. The industry was important for Smallville economy, and they were almost guaranteed a job there. The boys drew a picture of a calm and good future life in the village, like Daniel, who could not imagine living in a 'stressful big city' but in a small place, preferably Smallville where he had friends and family. Of the girls, two had clear plans for staying on in Smallville, and two others had not really decided, although they thought much about it, weighing their options – but Smallville was a realistic alternative. All of them considered female dominated care occupations like kindergarten, nursing or teaching, which were realistic work opportunities in Smallville. They either followed directly in the footsteps of their mothers or at least envisioned the same sector as their mothers. Both boys and girls hoped that their life would be like their parents'. They had in common that they led seemingly homogenous and gender traditional lives, and their way of thinking and being resembles the norm of Smallville and that of their parents. There was a sense of abundance of relationships in these young people's lives, they shared deep roots and took part of a close-knit community, and in their future, they planned to follow traditionally gendered paths. They just *fit*.

The three boys who planned to move had in common that they felt different than others, that they had had some negative experiences in the village with peers or that they did not have friends. Gaming was their typical way of spending their free time. When Lucas was 16, he said that 'I'm still gaming a lot of the time. I'm rarely out with friends. (…) and I'm fed up with homework.' He did not participate in any organised leisure activities but had recently started working out in the gym to 'shed some fat'. He thought Smallville was 'boring' and that there was nothing to do there, and that most people cared too much about their grades. Mikael wanted to move to a big city and perhaps study in the near future, but in the longer run he wanted to move abroad and have economic success, 'earn money while sleeping'. Rolf and Lucas also wanted to move abroad, specifically to the US – Rolf to become famous and Lucas to become rich: 'I want to move to the US and become boss in a firm, and to become a bit rich. I feel that most people who live in the US are pretty rich.' All three boys who saw their future elsewhere said explicitly that they wanted a life that was different than that of their parents, but they did not link their varying struggle with fitting in to their wanting to move. The three boys' motivation to leave, to move abroad and become

rich or famous or both, may indicate adventurous spirits, hubris or escapism, but also a rejection of the most common path for boys in Smallville.

The six girls who planned on living somewhere else in the future all thought the social environment was 'toxic', 'bad' or 'difficult'. All had struggled with fitting in, and they were usually more explicit about this experience than what was the case for the boys who wanted to leave. Some had been in contact with the local drug scene, others had been excluded and lonely, many had been bullied and been involved in conflicts and drama. All girls had at different times and different levels struggled with self-image and/or disordered eating. Exclusion, bullying and struggles with body image commonly went hand in hand. For Kaia, the struggles with bullying and exclusion had been ongoing for many years and she also felt deeply insecure about her body and looks. The same was the case for Sara, with conflicts, bullying and at times extreme dieting and workout regimes during lower secondary school. The troubles had come to a head during the last year of lower secondary school when she had had a big fight with her friend, and now, Sara felt that she was all alone: 'So I didn't go to school that often, because I had no one. When I did go, I had to lock myself into the girls' bathroom because I had no one to be with, no one.'

As opposed to the boys, these girls commonly and directly linked their wanting to leave Smallville to the fact that they disliked the social environment and did not feel that they fit in there. Anna, for example, answered the question of whether she imagined living in Smallville in the future by describing it as 'very anti-social, like toxic, not a very good environment, so I want to go another place in Norway or abroad.' Kaia had applied for an upper secondary programme in another city, but the programme was also available in Smallville, so she did not have to move – she just wanted to. She explained that at least 15 people planned on moving to another city, half of them because they were 'sick of their class here and want to get to know new people and try something new' – like herself. The other half, she explained, wanted to leave because they wanted to attend programmes that were not available in Smallville.

In the latter cases, pragmatism could go hand in hand with wanting to go away, like it also did for Emma who also planned on moving to a city for upper secondary school, away from the others whom she wanted to escape. She tried hard to improve her grades because: 'if I have the grades to get into the programme I've applied for, I can move. So it is really that. I want to leave'. Similarly, Sara had applied for a VET programme in Smallville which mostly boys attended, explicitly in order to get away from the girls she was no longer friends with and to get a new start: 'The social environment in Smallville is really bad, I don't know what happens with the girls'. After that she wanted to move to Osloor to another country. She was fed up with school and wanted to start working but did not really see the path ahead very clearly. At this important stage in their lives, when they were about to choose their future education, all these girls seemed primarily to want a life away from their rural peers. Their wishing to leave encompasses both claiming agency of their own future as well as a clear rejection of their present social environment.

The rural condition

What is it about the rural condition that may help explain the challenges that made many – and particularly girls – want to leave? What falls inside a rural community's definition of

'normal' is often narrower than in more central places; rural communities are frequently described as close-knit and controlling (see e.g. Rosvall and Rönnlund 2019). In Smallville, this social control was perceived by many, not surprisingly particularly among the girl who imagined leaving. This could come through as an extreme monitoring and sometimes punishing of identities other than white and heterosexual, with a particular status given to working-class male identity expressions. Sadia said that she felt that Smallville people were conscious of the fact that she was Muslim and different than others, and went on to explain:

> It is this gang that calls themselves Nazis. When they ask me [if I'm Muslim]. (…) I didn't want to say that I was Muslim, because I was afraid about the way they would react – 'yeah, you bomb people, you're a terrorist'. There are only boys in that gang. They are hillbillies. They love cars, they have that Nazi-flag as a background on their computers. I've heard them say that those who have dark skin should be hanged and then burned and then eaten by dogs. And Muslims should be stoned. So I was like, 'Eehhh I'm not a Muslim, okay? Don't come near me'. One was all 'white power, white power.' I was scared. And one brought a knife to school.

Emma, who identified as queer, said that: 'The environment in Smallville is (…) racist, homophobic, transphobic. This one guy said that trans people should go and shoot themselves. It is pretty usual here for Smallville people to be at least racist. It is often the popular and the hillbillies, they are usually pretty racist and homophobic.' A more encompassing but less extreme level of policing was evident in the way that almost all girls, and some of the boys, felt controlled and assessed based on their looks, both their bodies and what they were wearing. Janne worried about going to school because: 'I kind of dread what kind of looks I'll get. If I wear something ugly or – I don't know why I care. I feel that I look too fat or too thin, and I feel that everybody thinks the same'.

In the quantitative analyses, we saw that rural girls' lack of both well-being and inclusion (fitting in) is more strongly related to their wish to leave than for boys. The specific and strict social norms may be one way to understand this; the gendered, restricting and sometimes extreme controlling involved all the girls in different ways, and their possibilities of escaping them within the community were slim. Moreover, in all the cases of social policing in Smallville, the girls felt they had to adapt. The group that Sadia described as 'Nazis' was, with the threat of extreme violence, effectively forcing her to say that she was not Muslim, changing the ways she could behave and move in the village's public space. Those that Emma had described as 'homophobic hillbillies' set the tone that Emma, as queer and as a self-proclaimed 'outsider,' had been striving to conform to for year, although she longed to express her identity through clothes and style. The highly common body shaming or pressure to dress in specific ways was something that *all* the girls, and some of the boys, had to adapt to or consciously repudiate. Over time, many girls continued to express strong unhappiness about their looks. The internalisation of the environment's strict norms was evident in the fine, sometimes invisible, line between the girls' narratives about their feelings of not fitting in; on the one hand they said it was because of a toxic environment, and on the other because of something that was wrong with *themselves.* The three boys who expressed malcontent with the village and wanted to leave did not have as dramatic or clearly negative perceptions of their peers or their own self-image. It is also possible that they through gaming had

found an escape from the social environment that was less common and culturally available for girls.

Discussion

In this mixed-method study, we have investigated the gendered patterns in young people's wishes to stay or leave their rural homeplace in the future, and how these relate to psychosocial factors and well-being among peers. The quantitative analyses show a *gendered district effect*: Girls score gradually lower on psychosocial indicators the less central they live, and lower scores on psychosocial indicators are more strongly related to the expectancy to leave for girls than for boys. It is commonly assumed that educational aspirations are a main motivation for leaving for more central places for girls (for a discussion, see Rye 2006). However, we show that while rural boys without higher education aspirations are those who most often wants to stay in the municipality, rural girls *without* higher education aspirations are those who to the least extent want to stay in the rural community. We show here that the push from rural areas is a substantial reason for wishing to leave: It is likely that a lower degree of psychosocial well-being is part of the reason that more girls in rural areas wish to leave their homeplace in the future.

Based on the qualitative analyses of young people in the rural village of Smallville, we suggest that some of the explanation for the gendered district effect may lie in controlling and restricting social norms, which in Smallville seemed to affect many girls particularly. This may be related to two things. Firstly, the status of girls and women in the village of Smallville must be considered in light of the masculine dominance in the labour marked. The structural opportunities and limitations that a small village like Smallville offers its young are gendered as well as classed. As is the case for other rural communities (Bouchard and Wike 2022), the structural and gendered conditions of rural life may heavily influence girls' decision to leave. In Smallville, the choice of going into the local industry was the expected choice for boys; it was heavy with traditions and the examples of the men in their family. Although this, too, could be confining – and indeed, a future rejected by some of the boys – it was also status-filled; the village's past, present and future relied on that industry. Secondly, that the restrictive environment generally hit girls harder was evident in their expression of the village's social norms as restricted and directed at female bodies, sometimes with elements of extremist, homophobic and racist notions. It is likely that young men too, particularly those who feel different than the norm, would experience similar problems although they may not be narrated in the same ways as the Smallville girls did, and it is possible that boys expressed themselves differently also due to gendered patterns of expressing emotions. The internalisation of the restrictive social norms was more evident in the Smallville girls, who commonly expressed self-doubt and poor self-image.

To understand the conditions for transitions to adulthood for young people in rural areas, whether they are staying or leaving, we must understand the complexities of belonging. For those who end up leaving, this is rarely a simple choice. Xie and Reay (2019) suggest that rural and in particular working-class students' actual mobility to higher education away from home creates something akin to the 'hidden injury of class' (Sennett and Cobb 1993), injuries that are created in the fracture between allegiances to their roots on the one hand and their future elsewhere on the other.

Importantly, those who imagine leaving may not actually end up leaving. However, the imagining itself may play an important role in coming to terms with having to live a place where they feel as they do not fit in. Cuzzocrea and Mandich argue that:

> Young people may use imagined mobility to be reflexive about alternative futures to the ones that they feel currently constrained to in the space they occupy; this imagined future condenses needs that would otherwise remain unexpressed. Imagining mobility is thus an important tool in the 'capacity to aspire' toolkit, one that transcends the fact that young people may ultimately employ other strategies in real life. (2016, 562)

The wish to leave may be a way of claiming agency of their own future. However, although wanting to leave also encompasses a rejection of their present social environment, wanting to leave without being able to is also a challenging position, bound to demand complex negotiations of coming to terms with staying in a place where they do not feel neither enough inclusion, acceptance or recognition. Ravn (2022) argues in a study of Australian disadvantaged young women that these women choose to stay in the local area, not necessarily because they lack aspiration, but because they envision 'good enough' futures with a different set of aspirations revolving around the relational and social, cherishing the possibilities for intergenerational family life. Ravn concludes nevertheless that these '"good enough" futures are both classed and gendered', signalling 'an internalised feeling of inferiority; as a matter of knowing one's place and moderating one's aspirations accordingly' (Ravn 2022, 12). The *idea* of moving away, if this at least partially is borne out of *un*-belonging, is not so much an injury of the fracture from a physical and emotional move away from home, as an emotional preparation of that move. Such an emotional preparation may come from an estrangement – a disruption between different parts of an individual's different strands of belonging, between recognition, membership, possibilities and identification. The possibility of finding self-worth that may be combined with modern, rural, female lives is therefore important to explore in future research.

This study has some limitations which also may suggest avenues for further research. Although the psychosocial factors are included as potential mediators that can influence young people's desire to move or not, we cannot draw any conclusions about causality based on cross sectional data; we merely observe associations between moving plans and these factors, and these associations often interact both with gender and centrality. Moreover, the qualitative case study of Smallville is based on one Norwegian village. The patterns observed here may merely suggest possible explanations for the gendered district effects and may not be understood as basis for generalisation. Differently structured rural communities, for example communities dominated by farming or tourism, may have different implications for young people's feelings of belonging and well-being.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Since the pandemic affected the urban areas and the rural areas to highly different extent in Norway, we only use data up until 2019.

2. For more information, see https://www.ungdata.no/.
3. All names are pseudonyms. The programme was assessed and approved by Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. All participants and their parents were informed about the study and gave written consent. Personal data are stored and handled according to the GDPR. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and translated by the main author. For more information about the programme, see https://uni.oslomet.no/ungdom-i-endring/in-english/. The interviews in Smallville were conducted by Ingrid Smette, Eli Melby, Kristoffer ChelsomVogt and Lars Birger Davan.
4. For more information about Smallville and the study design, see e.g. Eriksen and Stefansen (2022), Eriksen et al. (2023), Eriksen, Stefansen, and Smette 2022.

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