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Going against the grain? A longitudinal study of the material-discursive practices of staying among young adults in rural Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article explores what staying rural means for Finnish young people who envision, or consider, a future in sparsely populated regions. The article draws on a qualitative longitudinal study of youth from three different regions. They were followed through qualitative participatory research methods since the age of 15 (2015–2022). The article opens new perspectives on the processes of staying rural by drawing on new materialist framework. The article suggests that staying should be viewed as a dynamic process in which different temporalities, materialities, and agencies intra-act, and which is marked by continuous decision-making and movement. The article introduces the concept of *material-discursive practices of staying* to highlight that staying is not only about individual or even human conditions but an intra-action of matter and meaning. Particular attention is paid to three material-discursive practices of staying by Finnish rural young people: (1) transgenerational practices of staying, (2) educational and career-related practices of staying, and (3) the outspoken tendency of 'going against the grain' in relation to urban youth cultures and normative expectations.

Introduction

During the last decade, youth studies have been increasingly criticized for metrocentrism. On one hand, it has been pointed out that there is a considerable knowledge gap concerning a vast population of rural young people, because youth studies have focused on urban youth (especially in the Global North) [e.g. Cuervo and Wyn 2012; Öhrn and Beach 2019]. On the other hand, researchers such as David Farrugia (2014) have shown that this bias reflects long-standing theoretical binaries in the social sciences. Classical theories have been constructed on a dichotomy between the rural and the urban. Urbanity represented progress in social theories of modernity, while rurality was associated with backwardness and history. Following this dichotomy, urban youth became the norm

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within youth studies, whereas rural young people were allocated in a marginalized position: disadvantaged compared to their urban peers, as well as less interesting from the perspective of youth researchers fascinated by flashy urban youth cultures (Farrugia and Ravn 2022, 2–3; Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021, 177–179).

Recently, however, there has been a growing interest in young people living in different areas defined as rural, both globally (e.g. Corbett 2007; Cuervo and Wyn 2017; Farrugia 2016; Farrugia and Ravn 2022; Morse and Mudgett 2018; Stockdale, Theunissen, and Haartsen 2018) and within Nordic countries (e.g. Areschoug 2019; Bæck and Paulgaard 2012; Eriksen and Andersen 2021; Maersk et al. 2021; Öhrn and Beach 2019; Sørensen and Pless 2017). These studies have indicated the complexity of issues related to decisions of building a future in areas that could be defined in terms of marginality – where educational and employment options are few and the out-migration of young people, particularly young women, is taken for granted.

This article draws on a qualitative longitudinal study of young people from three sparsely populated regions in Finland: Central Finland, Eastern Finland, and the Northern Sámi region. These young people were followed using participatory research methods since they were 15 years old (2015–2022). During this time, they faced many changes and challenges; they engaged in secondary level studies and some moved to independent living, formed relationships, and entered the labor market. At the same time, their relationships with rural places changed. The regions chosen pose many challenges that drive out-migration, such as long distances, aging communities, reduced services, and limited educational and labor market options (see, e.g. Armila, Käyhkö, and Pöysä 2018; Johansson 2016; Juvonen and Romakkaniemi 2019).

This article seeks to highlight the perspectives of young people that consider staying despite the challenges. We focus on those participants who chose to stay rural through their secondary level studies. By 'stayers,' we refer to young people who continued to live either in their rural home municipality or in the region including nearby rural towns within a relatively short distance from their hometowns (less than 100 km). More importantly, the young people selected for this analysis expressed belonging in terms of wishing to stay connected with and to build future lives in these regions.

We ask what staying rural means for Finnish young people who envision their future in regions viewed as rather remote and marginal by many others. Our focus is on the processual nature of staying rural, which emerges under social and material conditions. Instead of viewing 'staying' as a static state of passivity, permanency, and immobility, we emphasize the dynamic and processual nature of staying rural in the youth and young adulthood. Here, we follow Stockdale, Theunissen, and Haartsen (2018, 1–2), who defined staying as 'a state of flux,' as a result of an interplay between competing personal considerations that are closely associated with the stayer's past, present, and anticipated future biographies.

The article draws on Karen Barad's definition of material-discursive practices (Barad 2007), and on the concept of belonging, which has become increasingly popular in youth studies aimed at a more nuanced analysis of the complex ties between places and identity-building processes (e.g. Habib and Ward 2019; Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021). We approach belonging from a new materialist perspective that enables us to explore human and non-human agencies and how material factors co-constitute belonging in the sparsely populated rural regions.

Material-discursive practices of staying

Staying and belonging are not interchangeable concepts – staying in rural region may not always entail belonging and vice versa, people who feel strong belonging in their home region may nevertheless be obligated to migrate. However, our aim of reaching for the place-bound experiences of young rural stayers has directed our attention particularly to the role of belonging in the process of staying in sparsely populated regions. The notion of belonging is widely used in the human sciences. It has often been used to address young people's relationships with different places and societies where they live (e.g. Cuervo and Wyn 2017; Habib and Ward 2019). Belonging as an emotional attachment is often tied to questions concerning identity (Antonsich 2010) or approached as a political notion (Yuval-Davis 2006; 2011), but it has also been criticized for its vague definitions (Antonsich 2010; Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021). However, what characterizes different theorizations of belonging is an emphasis on its processual nature; belonging is not a stagnant notion but is in flux (Habib and Ward 2019, 1). This makes belonging a useful concept for studying young people, whose lifepaths are under construction.

Theorizations of belonging have gained new perspectives from new materialist approaches in recent years (Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021, 65). New materialist philosophy has turned researchers' gaze toward the affectivity and materiality of the world, highlighting how bodies and different materialities are part of the processual becoming of the world. Additionally, this approach seeks to challenge subject/object binaries and considers human and non-human (e.g. landscapes, objects, animals, and bacteria) entities as capable of acting; affecting, and being affected (e.g. Barad 2007; Bennet 2010; Fox and Alldred 2016.) This means that belonging comprises human and non-human actors with different temporalities. As Joanna Wyn, Hérnan, and Julia (2019, 15) have noted, '"Belonging" is an "affect" that is derived from assemblages of human and non-human entities.' When researching belonging through a new materialist lens, researchers have sought, for example, 'materialized micro-levels of belonging' (Korjonen-Kuusipuro, Kuusisto, and Tuominen 2019; Lähdesmäki et al. 2016) and 'dynamic interrelationships between people and places' (Wyn, Hérnan, and Julia 2019). We understand belonging as a process in which the social and material are entangled. We draw on Karen Barad's (2003; 2007) new materialist theorization by portraying how the material and the social intra-act in the interviews of rural young people. In an intra-action, phenomena are considered as primary ontological units in which 'things' are in an inseparable relationship with each other (Barad 2007, 141). By exploring young people's life through Baradian theorization, we seek to understand how young people's life choices are interconnected with the material world.

Barad (2007, 151) understands discourse as both a social and a material phenomenon. They have argued that the social has overtaken the material and has called for a more nuanced understanding of *material-discursive practices*, which would reconfigure notions of the social and matter as equal and mutual parts of a phenomenon (Barad 2003, 801–802, 810–817; Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 110). Drawing on Foucauldian and Bohr´s thought, Barad (2007, 147–149) re-delineates post human discursive practices as causal and on-going boundary-making practices, where matter, instead of being constructed or having a passive position, is affective and agential. For Barad, it is not merely what practices *are* but what they *do*. The purpose, then, is not to explain

something by looking from the outside but to understand how different processes open *of* the world (Barad 2007, 147; Barad and Gandorfer 2021, 16).

In the following we seek to examine how histories, matter, and meanings constitute belonging by applying the concept of material-discursive practices (see also Ivinson and Renold 2013). By combining the new materialist frameworks of belonging and discursive-material practices, we seek to identify the intersections of these notions and recognize how the *practices of staying* in rural Finland are not only a human condition but processes in which multiple entities intra-act (Barad 2007). Through this approach, we seek to produce a vivid perspective of young people's desire to stay rural.

Research localities, data, and methods

As noted by several researchers (Cloke 2006; Cuervo and Wyn 2012), rurality is a contested concept that can be used to describe various nonurban regions. In Finland, municipalities in which less than 60% of the population lives in the population center and where the biggest center has less than 15,000 residents are identified as rural. Our study is based on the urban–rural classification of seven regional classes developed by the Finnish Environment Institute. The localities chosen for our study are heterogeneous in terms of nature, culture, economic structure, and local history, but they can all be classified into the category of the most sparsely populated areas. Areas in this category are defined by dispersed small settlements that are located at a distance from each other. Most of the land areas are forested (Finnish Environment Institute 2018).

Notwithstanding many differences, we use the concepts of 'rural' and 'sparsely populated' to address all three regions in this study. These include one research site marked by the presence of agricultural and forestry enterprises (*the Central Finnish research site*), one marked by the availability of industrial work (*the EasternFinnish research site*), and one arctic region marked by the presence of indigenous culture (*the Finnish Sámi Homeland*).

The Central Finnish research site is a municipality with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, located more than 100 km from a major provincial center. Agriculture and forestry constitute a significant share (20%) of the local labor market. The Eastern Finnish research site can best be described as a withering industrial village, where the local labor market is strongly characterized by traditional factory work. With fewer than 1,500 inhabitants, the community is smaller than the Central Finnish research site but is situated closer to a major provincial center. The Sámi people are the only indigenous group in the European Union. Their transnational homeland Sápmi is located in northern Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula spanning Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Russia (Lehtola 2002, 10.) The Finnish Sámi Homeland consists of the northernmost parts of Finland – Eanodat, Ohcejohka, and Aanaar – and that of Soađegilli – Vuocchu, where 'the Sámi have self-regulation concerning their language and culture' (Sámediggi 2017). The structures of livelihoods consist of contemporary subsistence (e.g. tourism, services, and mining) and more traditional livelihoods [e.g. reindeer herding, fishing, berry picking, and duodji (traditional handicrafts)] (Sámediggi 2017). However, as in sparsely populated areas in general, unemployment rates in the Sámi Homeland are high. In terms of distances, the home villages of participants from the Sámi Homeland are located farthest from the major Finnish provincial centers in our study (more than 300 km).

The study design received ethical approval in 2015. Participants from the Central and Eastern Finland regions were recruited from one high-school class in each municipality during the school year 2015–2016, which was their final (9th) grade at primary school.[1] Participants from the Sámi Homeland were recruited from several small communities in 2019. Due to ethical consideration, all research sites and names have been anonymized.[2]

Our intention is not to compare the regions but to use the heterogeneity of the regions to highlight the plurality and complexity involved in the processes of belonging in sparsely populated areas more broadly. From the perspective of young people, there are both differences and striking similarities in how they view these regions and how they built relationships with the places over time.

Temporally, the article focuses on the period of secondary level studies (approximately between ages 15 and 19 years), which is generally characterized by gradual detachment from parents and childhood homes. A longitudinal study design (cf. Holland 2011; Saldaña 2003) enables us to take into consideration the back-and-forth movement that characterizes youth and young adulthood. In this article, we aim to capture what happens between two critical moments of time (Thomson et al. 2002) in the lives of rural young people: finishing of primary school and ending of secondary education, which has been described in terms of 'the second choice' for rural young people by Svendsen (2018). We argue that, in the context of youth mobility, dynamic approaches that recognize the processual nature of belonging are of particular relevance compared to cross-sectional data analysis, which often focuses on the end result (cf. Stockdale, Theunissen, and Haartsen 2018).

Our analysis is based on qualitative life course interviews conducted at the end of primary school (Central and Eastern Finland in 2016, Northern Finnish Sámi Homeland in 2019) and once or twice a year during the following years.[3] The follow-up interviews included both recurring and changing themes. A central theme discussed in all rounds was rural young people's relationship with their homeregions: how young people view their home regions in general, what kinds of positive and negative ideas they associate with their home regions, and whether they envision staying in the region or returning there later. The interviews were analyzed using conceptually informed qualitative content analysis (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018) and by a close reading through the theoretical lens of belonging introduced above. At first, we scrutinized all cases included in our longitudinal data archive (in total, 41 cases),[4] identifying rurally oriented young people who considered a future in rural areas. This included young people who stayed in their rural home regions including nearby towns after primary school or who considered the possibility of returning to rural regions after secondary level studies (in the Sámi context, a desire to stay in the wider Sápmi). In total, 19young people were identified with rural orientation (10 boys, 9 girls).[5]

Subsequently, we thematized the interviews with rurally oriented young people by mapping them against our conceptual frame of belonging. In this phase, particular attention was paid to how the young people described their relationships with their home regions, how they talked about their future, and how their sense of belonging intertwined with materiality in the rural places over time. We acknowledge that gender, femininities, and masculinities are essential parts of rural life, and we have been studying them elsewhere (e.g. Pöysä 2022; Ristaniemi 2023; Vehkalahti and Ristaniemi 2022). While we occasionally highlight the presence of gender in this analysis (e.g. in the context of

local specificities and career choices), in this article, we focus on themes that young stayers have in common, regardless of different places and gender. Based on a close reading of the interviews, three major themes were constructed: (1) material-discursive practices of *transgenerational belonging* in rural socio-material communities, (2) material-discursive practices of settling or returning to rural communities through *educational and career choices*, and (3) material-discursive practices involving the tendency of '*going against the grain*' in relation to urban youth cultures and normative expectations.

1 Transgenerational practices of staying

The first material-discursive practice (Barad 2007, 148) of staying rural leans on transgenerational connections to rural communities. These discourses were built through stories of close relatives and everyday practices that were entangled with local socio-material cultures. Belonging was constructed as part of an intergenerational chain where, for example, family, grandparents, grand grandparents, cousins, uncles, and aunts were an important part of young people's daily lives. Young people described how they were involved in everyday practices – such as taking care of younger children, doing groceries or cleaning, participating in herding work, or making firewood – or how they participated in various hobbies, like going to the gym, doing handicrafts, fishing, or hunting together with their kin. Many of these activities were part of the local ways of life, where material, cultural, and historical factors were entangled. By learning practical skills and bodily practices, the young people became part of their communities:

> [My father] raised me like, well you must do this and that, so he taught me how to change the hook on a fishing rod, how to fish with a spinning rod, how to gut a fish and how to ice fish … well I'm a better ice fisher than my dad, and then how to ride a sled. That's how I'd like to go with it, learn how to change a tire on a car and stuff like that. (Girl, Sápmi, 17years)

Multiple bodily skills are required and appreciated in rural areas. Even if some young people could not verbalize their attachment to their rural home places, they nevertheless settled into local communities with bodily acts and generational repetitions (cf. Wyn, Hérnan, and Julia 2019, 19). Many of the parents and relatives had taught young people skills, such as how to cope in nature or when alone. These skills entail affective bodily and transgenerational repetitions that carry cultural and historical means (cf. Ivinson and Renold 2021, 89). Thus, the acts that Walkerdine (2010) called *affective practices* not only made young people feel competent and safe but also made them feel part of their communities. Intergenerational relationships can affect how young people imagine their futures (Vehkalahti and Ristaniemi 2022).

Belonging in rural areas is also built through certain forms of work and future orientations. In the rural areas of Finland, several fields of employment are traditionally built on a chain of generations. For example, reindeer herding and agriculture are usually family businesses that are passed from one generation to another. At the Eastern Finnish research site, the boys' dreams and practices of staying largely relied on the local factory (see also Pöysä 2022). The factory had been in the village for more than half a century and had provided work and livelihood for generations of men and their families. A special network of boys and men was woven around the factory. In addition, the factory, as a building and material element, constituted belonging in the lives of the

boys and their families. Many of the boys who dreamed of staying had grown from early on to be part of the transgenerational socio-material chain:

> It's always been that factory right there all the time, like next door and then there's been working people I've known … my father has been working and my sister's husband has been working and my aunt's husband has been working and just like that … when one has lived in [this village] all his life, it's a thing that you want to go to work in the factory and it's always been such a fascinating place for me. (Boy, Eastern Finland, 18years)

In this quotation, one of our participants ponders his future lifepath and envisions himself as part of a factory community in the footsteps of his family members. Such choices can be analyzed as affective belonging, where young people position themselves as part of the intergenerational chain. Similarly, some girls from reindeer herder families discussed the option of becoming a herder themselves one day (cf. Joona and Keskitalo 2021; Ristaniemi 2023, 213–215). Some young people dreamt of living in a house owned by their parents in the future. This shows how the intergenerational chain was co-constituted in relation to the materiality of rural areas (cf. Latour 1986, 275).

It is important to note that belonging and being part of a transgenerational chain does not entail only joy and safety but may also embody negative, even harmful elements (cf. Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021, 193). Loneliness, bullying, gossiping, and experiences of being different are also present in our data. The very same socio-material practices that connected some young people to their home regions pushed others away (Pöysä 2022, 165–204; Ristaniemi 2023, 155–170.) Several young people mentioned how local cultures encouraged binge drinking and offered opportunities to do this in places hidden from adult gaze. While for some rural stayers, this appeared to be part of the rural freedom they appreciated, for others, the same aspects appeared as social problems. Therefore, the concept of belonging should not be considered only as a positive asset for rural young people.

1 Educational and career-related practices of staying

The concept of mobility imperative (Farrugia 2016) refers to how young people from sparsely populated areas in the Global North must learn to leave their home places to get education and reach for better career opportunities. As a result, rural young people are mandated to be increasingly mobile. Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn (2021, 172–180) point out that in the individualized societies of Global North mobility and higher education are taken as self-evidently positive goals up to the extent that refusal to be mobile or to aspire for ambitious careers is viewed as a failure (see also Maersk et al. 2021).

However, for some young people in sparsely populated areas, it may be more important to have access to education and careers that allow them to stay in their home regions. Further, educational and career-related choices should not be approached as individualistic choices only. In this section, we deepen our gaze on material-discursive practices and belonging that intra-act in educational choices adopted by young people. We suggest that finding ways of remaining in or returning to rural regions can be approached as intra-actions of multiple socio-material dimensions: educational, employment, and housing opportunities (cf. Barad 2007; Cuervo and Wyn 2017, 225–226).

The Finnish educational system strongly emphasizes secondary level education. In practice, young people are expected to apply either to academic upper secondary schools or to vocational schools upon finishing their primary schooling. However, educational options in sparsely populated regions in Finland are limited. Depopulation has amplified the centralization of education during recent decades (e.g. Armila, Käyhkö, and Pöysä 2018; Lanas, Rautio, and Syrjälä 2013). Thus, at the end of primary school, our participants faced a serious question: Should they stay and choose from regional options, or should they go for options that required mobility?

Finnish young people from sparsely populated areas (especially men) are more likely to choose vocational training instead of academic secondary level education compared to urban young people. However, our study shows that the availability and proximity of education had a strong impact on the choices of rural young people (see also Tolonen and Aapola-Kari 2022; Vehkalahti and Armila 2021). In the Eastern Finnish community, there were no academic nor vocational secondary level schools available, but it was possible to commute to city-based schools from the home village. Here, boys mainly enrolled in vocational education. In the Central Finnish community, both boys and girls were evenly distributed in academic and vocational secondary level education. In this community, there was an academic upper secondary school available, but no vocational schools. Vocational studies required mobility and living in school dormitories or independently, at least during the school week. Some opted for the local school primarily because they didn't wish to leave, or because they needed time to consider future possibilities. In the Sámi Homeland, educational possibilities were limited to three upper secondary schools and one vocational school. All girls from the Sámi Homeland started on academic track or in vocational education that involved an opportunity for a double degree.

Willingness to stay did not mean that young people would be completely immobile, quite the opposite. Many rural stayers commuted daily or moved to cities or bigger rural towns precisely to be able to return. For them, staying required material possibilities and enthusiasm to travel back-and-forth between the rural home place and the city every day:

> … when you have school from 8 am to 2 pm, you have to sit for an hour in the bus and you are in the home village sometimes around 3 o'clock pm so … […] when you go home you start to get really tired and then you might take a nap and then you can't fall asleep until 12 midnight to 1 am and then in the morning you would not like to get up that much again. (Boy, Eastern Finland, 17years)

The cases illustrates that staying was not just a one-time decision but re-made every day through bodily practices. Opportunities to continue living in the rural home place and stay connected to important people and places guided young people's plans. For boys, this translated into vocational studies in diverse fields of technology and engineering, construction work, civil engineering, manufacturing, and car repair education. Girls' rurally oriented choices included animal care and agriculture, as well as training in the service and healthcare sectors. More often than their southern peers, girls from the Sápmi saw higher education as a means of finding employment in the North in the future. The unifying factor, regardless of gender, was that the choices were made to meet the needs of the home regions (cf. Maersk et al. 2021.) This can be read as an intra-action of regions, their political histories, and desires of young people, which materializes as educational and career-related practices of staying.

Even if many young stayers seemed to slip into the local ways of life, belonging should not be considered a passive, readymade mold. As Yuval-Davis (2006) and Antonsich (2010) note, belonging is not an individual choice to stay in a place but a process of negotiation. For example, young people may have to contend with nearby rural regions because their home places do not offer them opportunities. Some may have to consider the relationship between unemployment and leaving:

> But it's such a lovely place, and I feel sorry that I probably won't be able to live there in the future, because there's not a lot of variety in the jobs available there. I'd like to do something different, something that I don't have the chance to do there, but maybe I'll get a summer house there, and come to mum´s and dad´s on holidays. (Girl, Sápmi, 17years)

This quotation shows how desire to stay may cause insecurity. Some girls from Sápmi stated that they might want to live on the Norwegian side of Sápmi because there were more employment opportunities, yet the area was rural. Similarly, some young people from other research sites envisioned themselves in other rural areas that felt homelike. Thus, staying did not always mean being confined to a single rural location.

The educational and career-related practices of staying were shaped by the different social and material conditions of the present and past. Young people's opportunities were directed by historical and contemporary education policy decisions, physical locations of the places, individuals' possibilities of commuting and moving, and transgenerational belonging discussed in the previous section. The young people recognized the marginal position of the rural areas and expressed their fears and worries concerning the future of their regions. The presence of histories and non-human materialities was notable in educational and career-related practices. While young people negotiate their future horizons and belongings, this happens in the intra-actions of practices of staying (cf. Barad 2007; Barad and Gandorfer 2021).

1 Going against the grain

We have named the third type of material-discursive practices adopted by rurally oriented young people 'going against the grain.' This practice is marked by a more outspoken resistance and (post human) performative (Barad 2003) acts against traditional age-related expectations in society (e.g. in relation to education, careers, and gender norms) and, more specifically, against the valorization of urban youth cultures and lifestyles. By highlighting that they preferred to go their 'own way,' despite expectations, these young people depicted their rural communities by underlining possibilities to 'be your true self' and to 'fulfill yourself.' While recognizing that their options in terms of educational and career choices might be wider in urban locations, these young people valued the possibilities offered by the rural milieu and communities above these opportunities. Outspoken criticism and bodily acts toward urban life, accompanied by emphasis on the freedom and genuineness of the countryside, marked the interviews of various young people whose trajectories could otherwise be quite different from each other.

At the end of primary school, some of our participants expressed criticism – sometimes even fears – toward urban living. During secondary education, many gained opportunities to experience urban environments personally. This strengthened the urban orientation of some of our participants, but for others the results were the opposite: The urban

environment strengthened their feelings of non-belonging in the city. They spoke disparagingly of urban life and described urban youth as stupid, disrespectful of their parents, drug users, and people who 'kicked grandmas.' In the following, a young man describes how young people living in the city had similar aspirations – to 'become a mass':

> […] they [urban people] are like robots, they walk around with their phones in their hands, and they all look exactly the same […].
>
> Interviewer: Well, is it easier here in the Forest Village then?
>
> Here [in the rural village] it's really easy, here the people dress up just the way they like, it's not like … no one ever makes any remarks about our outfit in the Forest Village […]. (Boy, Eastern Finland, 17years)

This quotation shows how being rural can be performative and include material, social, and cultural bodily factors that generate differences between the external characteristics of rural and urban youth (cf. Barad 2003). While urban is characterized by faceless masses, rural is characterized by rootedness, genuineness, relaxation, and tolerance.

For some, practices of staying constituted in the entanglements of multispecies and places, and in the emotions of appreciation of rural lifestyles. Contrary to more urban-oriented rural young people, who often mentioned the pressure of conformity as a negative aspect of rural communities, these young people seldom recognized the same pressure but rather described rural life in terms of freedom. This was strongly underlined by a young woman who returned to her native village after graduating from vocational school:

> Then there are certain type of girls here … [laughs] I can't explain how it is, but when you see them, you get that feeling that you don't want to hang out with them. [–] I don't know if you can call them, not snobbish, but like those awful type of women who are like 'Oh, I broke my nail, what do I do!?' – that sort of girls.
>
> Interviewer: Yes. Do you think there are different expectations for girls and boys here?
>
> Well, I don't know … I think some people may expect different things. But I don't know about that. [–] Those kinds of things don't play a role in my life. I'm not interested. I live here quietly with my cat, and other people may do whatever they want to! [laughs] (Girl, Central Finland, 19years)

This quotation manifests a distinction between those young women, who sought 'urban coolness', and the interviewee as a person who followed her own mind. For her, the material-discursive practice of going against the grain materialized in rural land and animals that constituted a more meaningful life than the commercial and youth cultural opportunities available in the cities.

Criticisms toward urban ways of life also included material aspects: the 'hustle and bustle' of the city, traffic, and exhaust fumes. Rurally oriented youth valued the peace and quietness of their home regions. The visual and material elements of the city produced alienation and anxiety, whereas the spacious rural landscape created a homelike feeling. The feeling of home, then, was an entanglement of rural material and social practices (cf. Wyn, Hérnan, and Julia 2019). In the plans of these rurally oriented youth, spacious living conditions played an important role. Single-family houses with a large plot of land that offered opportunities to have a garage, to fix cars and motors, etc., were

important. In their preferences, embodied imaginaries of material and cultural opportunities to continue this rural way of life outweighed any opportunities offered by the cities.

It is important to note that while the young people were eager to underline their determination to go their own way, their ponderings also reflected awareness of the dominant representations of urbanity (cf. Sørensen and Pless 2017). Rurality was constructed as a counter-reaction to urban life. However, the awareness of urban ideals did not translate to understanding rurality as an automatically marginalized position, quite the contrary: Within the material-discursive practices of 'going against the grain,' rural young people described the relationships between rural and urban locations, the periphery and the marginal, in different terms. Rural places emerged as the center of their lives.

Discussion

The so-called mobility imperative of rural young people – the need and desire of young people to out-migrate from rural areas to cities – is a broadly recognized phenomenon in the Global North (e.g. Corbett 2007; Farrugia 2016). Focus on mobility has also become somewhat of a hegemonic approach in rural youth studies. This approach is especially highlighted in studies concerning educational and career choices, but also in more culturally oriented studies on young people (e.g. Cuervo and Wyn 2017; Harris, Cuervo, and Wyn 2021, 169; Morse and Mudgett 2018; Rönnlund 2019; Sørensen and Pless 2017).

Social and institutional factors driving out-migration of rural young people – such as valorization of urban careers and lifestyles, and demand for educational mobility – have also been acknowledged in previous Finnish youth studies (e.g. Armila, Käyhkö, and Pöysä 2018; Juvonen and Romakkaniemi 2019; Lanas, Rautio, and Syrjälä 2013), but less attention has been paid at those often indiscernible processes that support staying in the rural regions.

In order to address the multidimensionality of staying, and to explore it in a more comprehensive way, we have introduced the concept *material-discursive practices of staying*. We argue that staying should be viewed as a dynamic process in which both social and material agencies intra-act. When we analyze staying as a material-discursive process instead of viewing it merely as an individual human choice that is socially constructed, staying can be viewed as a dynamic process in which different temporalities and agencies intra-act. From the new materialist standpoint, the choice to 'stay' rural takes its shape with places, people, histories, distances, and opportunities (or lack thereof). It is not only an individual or even human condition but an intra-action of matter and meaning. Further, the approach makes visible how the processes of staying are intertwined with affectual and emotional belonging shaped by meanings of the places, intergenerational practices, and future horizons of young people. A life that may seem marginalized from some perspectives – for example, concerning the current demand for young people to be mobile for educational and career-related purposes – can in fact be about settling into the local ways of living (compare Maersk et al. 2021). The ideals of a rural lifestyle, embodied experiences, and affects from the past and future intra-act in the process of staying (e.g. Barad 2007, 139–141).

We argue that youth research can gain from more-than-human approaches that consider questions like mobility patterns, place-attachment and staying from different viewpoints. The methodological shift can open more holistic ways of researching and

understanding the future visions and intentions of young people who are staying, longing for, or returning to rural areas. A more holistic view allows consideration of both cultural, educational, material, and social aspects of staying without prioritizing one of them. Hence, by focusing on material-discursive practices, it is also possible to see beyond and dismantle traditional urban/rural dichotomies, in which urban locations have been associated with progress and rural locations with marginality (cf. Farrugia and Ravn 2022). Material-discursive practices of staying open a possibility to produce a broader perspective on rurality, and eventually help to produce non-stigmatizing and more equivalent opportunities for rural youth.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored what staying rural means for Finnish young people who envision, or consider, a future in rural regions. The study is based on a qualitative follow-up of young people from three diverse sparsely populated regions in Finland. The longitudinal analysis shows that staying rural is not a one-time, nor an individualistic decision, or a stagnant state of being. The article contributes to on-going discussion about rural youth by showing that staying is a dynamic process in which both social and material, human and non-human agencies intra-act. This intra-action is conceptualized as *material-discursive practices of staying*.

The analysis highlighted three material-discursive practices of staying: First, for many rural young people the practices of staying were interconnected to belonging to an intergenerational chain. *Transgenerational belonging* was built through stories of close relatives and places and reinforced by everyday practices that were intertwined with local socio-material cultures. Some of the young rural people wished to continue, for example, in professions handed down by previous generations. Transgenerational belonging was also rooted in the history and culture of the region. Second, staying can also be approached as an active material-discursive process of belonging, where rural young people negotiate their education, career and lifestyles. *Educational and career-related practices* of staying would allow young people to live or return to their home regions later in life. Finally, the analysis revealed performative practices of staying. For some of the young people staying in the rural home region was about more outspoken and performative ways to '*go against the grain*' in relation to urban youth cultures and normative expectations associated with youth transitions. By performative affirmations and outspoken differentiations young people strengthened their rural positionings. What is common for all three dimensions, is the coexistence and entanglement of both material and social elements.

Concluding, we must note some limitations of the study. Firstly, it is important to note the context of this study: sparsely populated rural Finland. Secondly, the study is qualitative and the sample size is relatively small, although it is based on comprehensive longitudinal data collected over several years. Therefore, the material-discursive practices outlined here should not be generalized too widely. Quite the opposite, the new materialist approach underlines the importance of nuanced contextualization of research localities in youth studies. In different locations the intra-action of materialities, histories, and opportunities unfold different processes.

Notes

1. 36 participants (born in 2000) from Central and Eastern Finland were recruited during their last (9th) grade of primary school (2015–2016) as part of the project *Youth in Time*, which involved five geographically, socially, and economically different municipalities in Finland. The follow-up involved 9 boys and 9 girls in Central Finland, 11 and 7 boys in Eastern Finland. During the 9th grade, the young people were interviewed three times, individually and in small groups. They continueto be interviewed individually (or in pairs, as per their preference) once or twice a year in projects *Rural Generations on the Move. Cultural History of Rural Youth, 1950–2020* and *My Countryside: Intergenerationality, place and gender.* The interviews analyzed in this article were conducted by Kaisa Vehkalahti (Central Finland) and Ville Pöysä (Eastern Finland); some were conducted in collaboration with Päivi Armila, Mari Käyhkö, and Sinikka Aapola-Kari. For the recruitment and study design, see Vehkalahti and Aapola-Kari 2021; Vehkalahti and Armila 2021; Pöysä 2022, 51–66.
2. 12 girls (born in 2003–2004) were recruited from Sámi Homeland as part of the project *Northern Rural Youth in Flux* during their 8th or 9th grade of primary school (2019–2020). They continue to be followed in the project *The Future of Nordic Youth in Rural Regions: A Cross-national Qualitative Longitudinal Study in four Nordic Countries.* Data generation followed the model developed in the abovementioned *Youth in Time* project, but particular attention was paid to the Northern and indigenous context. All interviews were conducted by Helena Ristaniemi. For the recruitment and study design, see Ristaniemi 2023, 55–71.
3. This includes 49interviews in Central Finland, 82 in Eastern Finland, and 22 in the Sámi Homeland carried out when the participants were between 15/16 and 19 years old. Recurring themes included education, career plans, mobilities, social relations, and free time. In longitudinal research, new discussions are based on previous encounters and the relationship established over the years. Discussion topics varied depending on what was relevant in the life of each participant at the time. Sensitivity toward participants' feelings and preferences has been emphasized in the ethical protocol (cf. Vehkalahti and Armila 2021).
4. 15 remained in the follow-up in Central Finland, 15 in Eastern Finland, and 11 in the Sámi Homeland, as 7 participants withdrew.
5. 4 boys from Eastern Finland, 6 boys and 4 girls from Central Finland, and 6 girls from Sámi Homeland. The Eastern Finnish research site stood out with a higher share of urban-oriented young people (11 out of 15), which is largely explained by the unavailability of secondary level education in the municipality. However, our sample size was small and not statistically representative of generalization. Second, our analysis concerned the time period of secondary level studies. Based on previous studies, many rurally oriented young people out-migrate when continuing to tertiary education or entering the labor market.

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