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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Staying in a state of flux: A life course perspective on the diverse staying processes of rural young adults

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**Abstract**

Few studies examine immobility or staying as a demographic process worthy of investigation. This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature. It uses a life course approach to analyse interviews with young adults who continue to reside in their rural home areas of Northern Ireland and the Netherlands. Our analysis relates to stayers' biographies and linked lives, staying as a state of flux, and staying as an attachment to (rural) place. Staying is found to be the outcome of a complex interplay between competing personal considerations, which are closely associated with the stayer's past, present, and anticipated future biography. It is a relational process linked to the lives of others (parents, partners, and children) through either choice or senses of obligation. Far from being a passive process, stayers exert considerable agency. They elect to belong to the familial, physical, and social elements of rural place, informed by senses of nostalgia and dwelling. The decision to stay is renegotiated with the onset of new life stages. The process of staying is, therefore, dynamic, multifaceted, and nuanced. Staying is in a state of flux.

**KEYWORDS**

biography, elective belonging, immobility, place attachment, youth

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Even though only a small proportion of national populations changes address every year and mobility—or even desiring to move—is an infrequent occurrence in most people's lives (Coulter & van Ham, 2013), migration and mobility studies dominate the population literature. When staying is studied, it is commonly analysed as the residual to migration (e.g., Thomas, Stillwell, & Gould, 2015): “... as the absence of an event (mobility) rather than as an occurrence worthy of analysis” (Hanson, 2005: 15301). Moreover, migration discourse devalues staying, especially in rural areas (Ní Laoire, 2001): To stay is perceived as “staying behind” or having “failed to leave” (Looker & Naylor, 2009). Such negativity is also embedded in rural communities where a common perception is that one has to leave to “move forward” (Nugin, 2014). There are tensions too in how rural policy views staying: On the one hand, it is perceived to be bad for social mobility and the economy; on the other hand, it is good for communities.

Amidst growing non-migration trends (Smith & Sage, 2014) and within the context of the “mobility turn” in the social sciences (Sheller

& Urry, 2006), there have been recent calls to reconceptualise residential immobility as a meaningful process in its own right (Cooke, 2011; Cooke, 2013; Coulter, van Ham, & Findlay, 2016; Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018). This paper responds to these calls by examining the staying processes associated with young adults (aged 18–30) who continue to reside in the Dutch and Northern Irish countryside where they spent their childhood. Informed by Haartsen and Thissen (2014) and Rérat (2014), stayers are defined as those who never left or who temporarily left but mentally stayed in the home region. Young adulthood is characterised by multiple life events, such as leaving the parental home, continuing education, or commencing employment, union formation and family formation that trigger decisions to stay or leave (Clark, 2013; Feijten, Hooimeijer, & Mulder, 2008). Our focus on rural areas is informed by the culture of youth migration from rural areas (Glendinning, Nuttal, Hendry, Kloeb, & Wood, 2003; Nugin, 2014): “... many young people move ‘ad hoc’, more or less ‘going with the tide’” (Johansson, 2016: 293). Young adults who do not conform to this norm and “stay put” are rarely studied. At a time when rural populations are ageing, retaining young adults and understanding their

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staying processes are important. We adopt a life course perspective and the related concepts of biographies and linked lives (Bailey, Blake, & Cooke, 2004; Coulter et al., 2016; Halfacree & Boyle, 1993) to analyse the dynamic process(es) of staying around three key themes: stayers' biographies and linked lives, staying in a state of flux, and staying as an attachment to (rural) place.

## 2 | TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We contend that the literature on immobility or staying oversimplifies what are likely to be highly complex and nuanced staying processes. Although the multiple factors governing the decision to leave or stay are reported, much less is known about how these competing considerations are negotiated and reconciled. Accordingly, we acknowledge that staying can be "an active and informed choice" (Hjälml, 2014: 577): Stayers have not necessarily "failed to leave," as the migration discourse might lead us to believe, but instead may have made a positive decision to stay based on different aspects of their lives. To understand the young adult's current situation, which is to have stayed in the place of their childhood home, one needs to situate the staying event(s) within life course biographies (Barcus & Halfacree, 2018; Coulter & van Ham, 2013; Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Shanahan, 2000). We consider individual lives as unique biographies composed of personal influences, events, and experiences: An event, such as staying, "exists as part of our past, our present, and our future; as part of our biography" (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993: 337). Although influences, events, and experiences may appear to relate to separate domains of oneself (home, family, work, finances, leisure) they are commonly interrelated, messy, and entangled. A "family" event, such as union formation or separation, will bring changes to the "home" and "financial" situation. For one or both partners, it will lead to mobility and a change of address. Furthermore, individual biographies are rarely, if ever, devoid of the influence of others. Events in the lives of a parent, a partner, a child, a sibling, or peers impact on our biography. However, few studies refer to these linked lives (an exception is Cooke, 2013) although Coulter et al. (2016, 367) advocate

*re-thinking residential mobility and immobility as relational practices that link lives together and connect people to structural conditions through time and space.*

Past studies portray immobility or staying as a personal choice or the outcome of certain constraints. Although almost always considered as a nuanced continuum (Cresswell, 2012), choice and constraint have been labelled still and stuck (Coulter et al., 2016), rooted in place and tied to place (Barcus & Brunn, 2009), attached and detached (Jamieson, 2000), and intentional and unintended stayers (Fernandez-Carro & Evandrou, 2014). The suggestion is that stayers make trade-offs between different domains of their lives. "Attached stayers" (Jamieson, 2000) choose lower work-life aspirations in favour of being surrounded by family and friends. Those "tied to place" (Barcus & Brunn, 2009) prefer to live elsewhere but are prevented from doing so by family or financial obligations. Furthermore, choices are constrained by structural factors, such as employment or housing availability:

*in order for someone to stay ..., there has to be an adequate fit between the personal motivations and resources, and the place-specific opportunities (Kuhmonen, Kuhmonen, & Luoto, 2016: 91).*

These studies rightly draw attention to the different factors affecting staying behaviour and that these arise from multiple and competing life domains. However, by attempting to categorise staying, they underplay the likely complexity of the staying process. In particular, they understate how different life events impact on the decision to stay or leave. Many report on only one life event (for young adults, it is leaving the parental home and/or entry into further education or employment) and ignore other current or anticipated events such as union and family formation or dissolution. In addition, although "tied" and "unintended" labels acknowledge "linked lives," they do not capture how the lives of others are reconciled in the decision to stay.

Moreover, migration and staying are unlikely to be opposites: an either/or choice. Instead, recent evidence points to them as blurred or related processes. Halfacree and Rivera (2012: 109) claim that migration and non-migration are best considered as "mutually generative and intricately entangled." Haartsen and Thissen (2014) and Rérat (2014) suggest that some young return migrants should be considered as stayers: They temporarily lived elsewhere for higher education while mentally they had stayed in the home rural region. Mata-Codesal (2018) and Ye (2018) show that the leave/stay decision is often part of complex family life strategies. Some family members leave to enable others to stay, and leaving now enables that individual to return and stay in the future. Such research supports a life course perspective that considers staying within the context of individual and family biographies. Immobility/mobility as opposites can also be challenged from the perspective of the "new mobilities" paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006). This paradigm alleges an increasingly mobile and connected world, nevertheless, particular aspects of this discourse permit staying. Employment and further education are recognised motivations for youth out-migration from rural areas. Increasing auto and virtual mobilities (internet, email, and skype) mean that it is no longer essential to live near where one works or studies. More and more numbers commute greater distances and more work, at least part of the time, from home. Similarly, increasing numbers of further and higher education students continue to live at home (Christie, 2007).

Helpfully, previous research identifies a range of factors impinging, in particular, on young people's moving behaviour. The role of family is acknowledged (Jamieson, 2000; Rye, 2011) when children are socialised into either moving or staying through a combination of class background and family migration history. Working class young people are more likely, and those whose parents have moved into the area least likely, to stay. It is implied that the latter are less rooted or attached to the rural place. Community is also identified as an influence. According to Carr and Kefalas (2009) and Corbett (2007) the community, and especially rural schools, informally sort children into "stayers" (low achievers from working-class backgrounds) and "achievers" (academically bright and college-bound migrants). Mellander, Florida, and Stolarick (2011) find that community quality of life characteristics (especially the physical setting and social aspects) matter considerably more to stayers than local economic conditions or individual economic or demographic factors. Others

suggest that young adults who wish to stay in their home rural area are positive about local employment opportunities (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014) and include a desire to work in primary sectors (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006), place a high value on natural beauty, air quality, and peacefulness (Haukanes, 2013), have been raised in the community of residence (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006), or have lived in a rural area (Kuhmonen et al., 2016).

Place attachment and belonging are consistently reported as important (Glendinning et al., 2003; Kloep, Hendry, Glendinning, Ingebrigtsen, & Espnes, 2003; Leopold, Geissler, & Pink, 2012; Looker & Naylor, 2009; Thissen, Droogleever Fortuijn, Strijker, & Haartsen, 2010) and can out-weigh any perceived negatives to staying in the rural. Attachment may be because of family roots, memories, and a sense of home; to social factors, such as close family or friendship ties and a sense of community; to places of living memory, residential familiarisation, or socialisation; or to the physical and natural qualities of the area (aesthetic, wilderness, and biological diversity; Gustafson, 2002; Lewicka, 2011; Rérat, 2014; Trell, van Hoven, & Huigen, 2012). People identify with places and contrast this with places that are different. This is often referred to as *identifying against* (Rose, 1995). Scale is important: The attachment may be to a region, an area, or locality, to a landscape (Barcus & Brunn, 2010; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001) or to a particular house where ancestors once lived (Roin, 2015). This attachment and sense of belonging will have been strengthened by “personal moments of the place” (Antonisch, 2010), that is, the stayer's past, present, and anticipated future biography in that place.

According to Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst (2005) and Savage (2010), several narratives of belonging to place exist. In “nostalgia,” a longing for the loss of values associated with former times dominates. “Dwelling” relates to homing practices with the individual passively identifying with their home place. It emphasises “the given-ness of place” (Savage, 2010: 131). In “elective belonging,” the place of residence is chosen by claiming “moral rights over place through the[ir] capacity to move to, and put down roots in, a specific place which was not just functionally important [to them] but which also mattered symbolically” (Savage, 2010:116). Savage presents nostalgia and dwelling as traditional types of belonging, frequently ascribed to locally born and bred, while he associates elective belonging with how middle class newcomers elect to belong. Elective belonging has also been explored in terms of how newcomer families with children become rural stayers (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). In this paper, we argue that elective belonging is important in the processes of staying by locally born and bred as well, and allege that rural young adult stayers may demonstrate elements of nostalgia, dwelling, and elective belonging.

Closely linked to place attachment is the concept of “rurality.” Rurality holds different meanings for different people (Rye, 2006) and has been shown to influence decisions to stay, leave, or return (Haartsen & Thissen, 2014). On one hand, the countryside is idyllic, inclusive, and caring; and on the other hand, it is dull, intrusive, and constraining (Henderson, 2005). Equally, perceptions of the rural, and indeed place, vary across the life course (Haartsen, Groote, & Huigen, 2003). It is good for children (idyllic) but not so good for teenagers (dull) (Haartsen & Strijker, 2010), and rural adolescents express a preference for rural living when they are older (Glendinning et al., 2003; Rye, 2011). A rural residence is attractive to families (Kuhmonen et al.,

2016) and those at or around retirement (Lowe & Speakman, 2006; Stockdale & MacLeod, 2013). It is likely then that the decision to leave or stay is not made once, but repeated at each life transition and hence made several times (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018; Hjälml, 2014; Ye, 2018). The longer one stays, however, the greater likelihood of staying in the future (Fisher & Malmberg, 2001). As people become attached to their location they build up, what Morrison and Clark (2016) call, endowment and become increasingly averse to moving. Stayers can be expected then to “elect to belong” to rural place at each life transition.

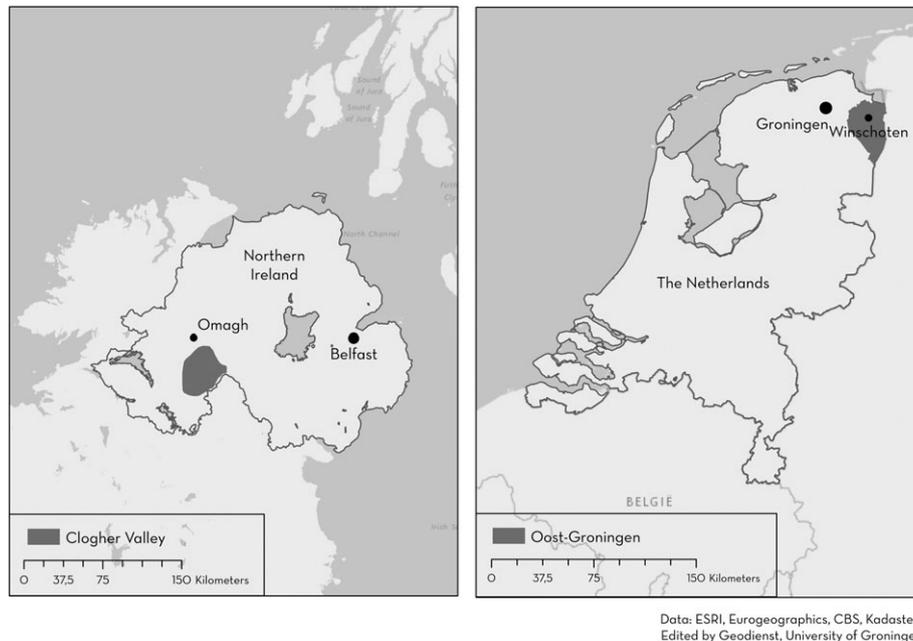
Young adults are presented in the literature as highly mobile and, in a rural context, leaving is frequently normalised. Yet many stay. Other studies investigate staying by older people (Fernandez-Carro & Evandrou, 2014; Hjälml, 2014), families (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018), and the staying intentions of adolescents (Kuhmonen et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the processes of staying by young adults are not well understood. This paper begins to unpack the dynamic aspects of staying and sheds deeper insights into the processes by which young adults stay in their home rural areas.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

Interviews were undertaken with young adult stayers in 2016 in two rural areas: Oost-Groningen in the north of the Netherlands and the Clogher Valley area of County Tyrone in the west of Northern Ireland (Figure 1). It is not our intention to compare these two case studies but instead explore how the place-specific characteristics of “rural” impact on the processes of staying. Like most European rural areas, both have highly spatialised forms of rurality and a tradition of out-migration (Johnston, 2015; Thissen et al., 2010).

Both areas are remote in their national contexts. Oost Groningen is composed of dispersed farms, small villages, and three regional centres (Veendam, Winschoten, and Stadskanaal). The nearest city is Groningen: a major employment and public service centre within daily commuting distance (on average 45 min by car). The Clogher Valley area is composed of a dispersed population linked to a tradition of small family farming. Its local settlement pattern is made up of small towns (such as Fivemiletown and Clogher), villages, and hamlets (Eskra and Newtownsaville) and is dependent on nearby regional centres (Omagh, Dungannon, and Enniskillen) for employment and public services. Omagh is a 30-min drive and Belfast—Northern Ireland's principal city—is 90 min by car. The names Oost Groningen and Clogher Valley have no administrative meaning. They are geographical labels used by residents to signify a strong local identity and culture.

To acknowledge that staying is not an either/or decision but a blurred process, we adopt a “social-constructivist” definition of staying, that is, those who never left or who temporarily left but mentally stayed in the home region (Haartsen & Thissen, 2014; Rérat, 2014). Young adults (aged 18–30) who continue to reside in the area in which they spent their childhood (stayers) were recruited for interview via various means: appeals in local newspapers and on social media, contacts with local community groups (churches and sports groups), posters inviting “volunteers” displayed in local shops, authors' personal contacts in each area, and snowballing where initial interviewees “recruited” a friend to participate. Nevertheless, recruitment was slow and resulted in a sample of 22: 12 in Northern



**FIGURE 1** Location of study areas

Ireland and 10 in the Netherlands of which five were cohabitating couples, with both partners interviewed together. We acknowledge that by only focusing on stayers, the study omits those who wished to stay but had to leave (that is, reluctant leavers) and that at interview stayers may put a favourable gloss on, or struggle to articulate, their decisions.

Each interview was conducted in the interviewee's native language (Dutch or English) and in a place of the interviewee's choice, mainly their home. The interviews were conducted by two young female researchers, lasted on average 90 min, were recorded, and later transcribed. A semistructured in-depth interview technique was adopted and, in keeping with our life course perspective, it followed a self-biography and explored significant life events and stages, personal histories of family and social networks, experiences of the rural home area, and the staying-related decision-making.

Once transcribed (in the native language), transcript analysis involved close reading and re-reading by the researchers in each country. Emergent themes and illustrative excerpts were independently identified as part of an iterative analytical process. It was only at this stage that the emergent themes from both study areas were combined. Illustrative excerpts from the Dutch interviews were also then translated into English that facilitated further analysis of both the Dutch and NI data by all of the research team. It is acknowledged that this selective translation of the Dutch data into English restricted a more thorough analysis of the Dutch interviews by the English-speaking team. Full translation, however, was prohibited by cost: Nevertheless, because all of the Dutch interviews were read and re-read independently by two Dutch researchers (including the interviewer) who both also read the NI transcripts, we are confident that the analysis provides illustrative insights into the processes of (rural) staying. Extracts from interviews use a pseudonym and the abbreviation NI (Northern Ireland) and NL (Netherlands).

## 4 | THE STAYING PROCESS(ES)

In this results section, the life course perspective on staying process(es) is presented as a series of interweaving influences and considerations pertaining to different life domains and different life events now and in the future. These are discussed with regard to stayers' biographies and linked lives, staying as a state of flux, and staying as an attachment to (rural) place. Although presented separately, all are interconnected and, consciously or subconsciously, considered simultaneously. In common with Hjälms's (2014) study of older urban stayers, what emerges is the agency of young rural stayers. Few are "stuck" in rural place and instead "elect to stay," although the perceived degree of choice, strength of decision-making, and permanency are variable. Such variability relates to the stayer's past, present, and anticipated life events.

### 4.1 | Stayers' biographies and linked lives

Young adulthood displays a range of life transitions (continuing education, commencing employment, union and family formation, and union dissolution) and, accordingly, a range of competing influences inform the staying process. Decisions to stay are associated with key events not only in the life of the stayer but in the lives of family members also.

First, there are young adults who, despite entering a more independent or "grown up" life phase, choose to remain in the parental home. Imke commutes daily to university in Groningen. This is a rational choice, which combines further study with other aspirations:

*I stay mainly because I play football here ... we train Tuesday and Thursday and play on Saturday. So I'd have to return at least three times a week [if lived in Groningen]. And I work at a retirement home every other weekend. ... I'd have to get a student loan if I wanted to live in student accommodation ... then I would start building up a debt, which isn't necessary ... (Imke, NL).*

Similarly, Lindsey (NI) remains in the parental home while completing her PhD. Her decision to stay is based on financial considerations: She feels that she could not afford to live on her own. For both Imke and Lindsey, continuing to reside with their parents is the practical outcome of weighing up different aspects of their lives. Each has elected to stay because doing so reconciles continuing their studies with other financial, employment, or leisure domains of their lives.

On occasions staying in the parental home extends to subsequent life events, such as the commencement of employment. Rachel is a teacher in a local primary school and could easily afford to live independently of her parents. However, to live at home is

*... to be honest, it's easier .... You come home and there's dinner on the table ... I do work long hours, so that definitely does help .... And I'd say I'd have quite a good quality of life as a result (Rachel, NI).*

To interpret Rachel's decision to stay as the "easy option" oversimplifies her staying process. Staying for her is more nuanced than it first seems. Following graduation, she returned to the family home temporarily while applying for teaching positions throughout the UK. Rachel first secured temporary positions in a local school (as sick leave and maternity leave cover). Then when a permanent teaching post became available in the same school, she was the successful applicant. She explained staying as a lot of coincidence and perceives that she did not make a conscious decision to stay. Importantly, although Rachel had not expected to stay because of a perceived lack of local teaching positions, she had not ruled out the possibility of staying either. By applying for local work, she was amenable to staying. Staying in the home area was, therefore, a chance outcome of her employment search, and having secured a local teaching post continuing to reside in the parental home was a practical decision.

Following graduation, Rifka too returned to the parental home while waiting for her boyfriend to complete his studies. The couple's intention was to move to where they could both secure employment. While waiting for her boyfriend to graduate, Rifka

*[thought], if I can just entertain myself for some months. So I started working as a cleaner, just to have something to do ... I also sent a speculative application to the [local] hospital and I got invited [for interview] and then uh ... I got hired. Which actually came as a shock. I did not expect it (Rifka, NL).*

An unexpected local employment opportunity, fitting each's qualifications, led then to Rachel and Rifka staying in their home areas, and choosing to remain in the parental home, while having an open mind towards leaving the home region and the parental home.

Second, other young adults have left the parental home but have chosen to stay in the home area because of linked lives to partners and family. Again, just like those remaining in the parental home, the decision to stay at these life stages was both planned and unplanned. Amy and her partner David are expecting their first child. They made a deliberate decision to stay in their home area, which is perceived as providing valuable support at this family formation life phase. Such support is

*... a comfort blanket. ... I think it will be handy, mum and dad ... they can just pop in ... and when the baby comes we'll be loving having them just beside us (Amy, NI).*

By contrast, Bart's decision to stay was in response to an unplanned life event. Bart's girlfriend became pregnant and, as he explains, his decision was to stay with his girlfriend rather than necessarily stay in the area

*[I]t was a very conscious choice to not leave her. But not specifically to stay in [named village]. ... my world, my life was turned completely upside down (Bart, NL).*

Two unexpected life events impacted on Marjolein's staying decision. As a student, she became pregnant, dropped out of university, married, and stayed in the home area. Then, following her divorce, Marjolein would have liked to move to Groningen. However, paradoxically union dissolution, especially when children are involved, can mean that the separated partners need to remain in the same area to facilitate co-parenting.

Life events or the onset of specific life stages influenced the decision to stay by these young adults. The staying process is inextricably linked to the lives of their (ex)partners and children and is presented in positive terms, that is, as a good thing for the couples and their children. However, in the examples below, staying is portrayed as an obligation with the young adult presented as a tied or reluctant stayer (Barcus & Brunn, 2009). For them, the staying process is characterised by tensions between different life domains. The obligation has competed with a desire to leave, and won.

Daniel (NI) presents leaving as the norm and staying as the outcome of someone or something holding the person back. To stay, in his words, is to be "kept behind," which resonates with the findings of Ní Laoire (2001). Daniel's staying process centres on two competing personal goals that are irreconcilable. On one hand

*I was always hoping I'd run the family farm, it was always my aim in life (Daniel, NI).*

On the other hand, he wished to emigrate to Canada, which he perceived as offering a "better lifestyle." To achieve either goal, he had to forgo the other. The farm won

*If the farm wasn't here I probably wouldn't be here.*

However, there is another possible interpretation to Daniel's account. He may be offering the farm as a justification for not emigrating (rather than as a reason for staying). He clearly views emigration as a positive act, signalling ambition, and a quest for an improved life. With such an outlook, to admit that staying was a personal choice might imply that Daniel lacked ambition. Indeed, he is perhaps justifying his decision not only to the interviewer but also to himself.

Understanding the tensions between personal and family life domains helps explain Clare's staying process. A personal need to "leave" is out-weighted by a perceived parental responsibility to look after her ill mother:

*My life is not my own at the minute. ... there's nobody else here [to look after mum]. ... One minute, I know I need to get out of here [i.e. leave], I need to do it and sort myself*

... but then other times ... she takes these spells where she would be falling a lot ... and I knew I wouldn't be able to do it [leave] ... (Clare, NL).

## 4.2 | Staying in a state of flux

To view staying as an event and part of the stayer's biography acknowledges that the decision to stay (or leave) is likely to be renegotiated at subsequent life stages and life events. Staying is not a one-off decision but a recurring decision-making process: Staying is, therefore, in a state of flux (cf. Hjälm, 2014; Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). The narratives from rural young adults demonstrate that this renegotiation is very nuanced. For some, it is an ongoing process that has yet to lead to a decision. Others have already renegotiated the decision to stay in response to subsequent life events, whereas some anticipate doing so in the future.

The decision to stay or leave is ongoing for Melvin (NL). He has yet to reconcile different aspects of himself and, accordingly, has yet to make a decision. For now, Melvin stays in his home village:

*I can get along with every group in the village, but I am still missing something. ... you would not, I think, head to the Randstad [cities in west of Netherlands] as a "village boy." ... I am someone who is open to new things, but actually I'm also scared of new things, .... I actually go back to what is familiar. While the familiar does not, well, develop into something. It's just always the same (Melvin, NL).*

Similarly, the negotiations to stay or move can be ongoing among couples. This is consistent with the family migration literature (Coulter, van Ham, & Feijten, 2012). Niels (NL) compromised on a desire to stay in his home village (Midwolda) to live in that of his partner Maaïke. However, discussions and negotiations continue

*We want to return to Midwolda. Yeah, blood is thicker than water. I uhm, I want to return to Midwolda (Niels, NL).*

*Yes, we've had plenty of discussions about that. ... I have some friends now in Midwolda, so uhm ... Well, I would like to live in a detached house ... I would like to come along [to Midwolda] (Maaïke, NL).*

This couple demonstrate that the staying process is a relational practice, in a state of flux, and reflects different domains of the couple's life together. At the time of interview, Maaïke is increasingly amenable to living in Niels' home village. In order to acquire her desired detached house, Maaïke is willing to compromise on the place of residence within Oost-Groningen.

In addition, several young adults have already renegotiated their staying decision in response to life events. This frequently involves a change in the agency of the stayer. Bart, reported earlier, initially stayed because of an obligation to his girlfriend when she unexpectedly became pregnant. But following union dissolution when his ex-wife moved to Groningen with their then two children, Bart chose to stay. This second decision to stay, when it might have been easier

for him to move to Groningen to be nearer his children, was a much more considered decision than the first. It was made with greater regard to other non-family domains of Bart's life. Now, he exerts greater agency in his staying process.

*I decided that I am staying. Especially because I think this is a good place for the children and I don't necessarily need to go to Groningen, especially not by myself. You leave everything behind. ... The biggest part of my social network is here ... you would then uh, drop that .... I am staying here (Bart, NL).*

Alisa's (NL) staying process further demonstrates how the decision to stay is made with each subsequent life transition and, accordingly, staying becomes part of her biography. The ongoing strength of her agency and commitment to stay in the home area are particularly notable. First, as a student Alisa (like Imke and Lindsey) choose to remain in the parental home and commute each day. She explains this decision with reference to family and friends:

*[I was] attached to my mom by an umbilical cord ... and my friends were here as well (Alisa, NL).*

Second, having completed her studies, Alisa (in contrast to Rachel and Rifka) restricted her employment search to the home area:

*Because I did not want to leave for a job. I did not want to move out of here. So I stayed at home, unemployed (Alisa, NL).*

After six jobless months, Alisa re-trained as a psychiatric nurse, which she viewed as a lower education level than her qualifications. Such re-training, however, ensured that Alisa's skill set matched those required in the home labour market and enabled her to stay.

Other young adults anticipate having to renegotiate their decision to stay in response to future life events. They acknowledge that staying is not necessarily a permanent decision in young adulthood. Those who continue to reside in the parental home anticipate having to reconsider the decision at a union formation stage and/or the commencement of employment, and others when parents require greater familial support.

Lindsey and Imke recognise that they "cannot live in the parental home forever" and expect to re-assess that decision when they complete full-time education. In Lindsey's case, she is already trying to reconcile her need to move for employment—"maybe closer to Belfast"—with a perceived obligation, as the oldest daughter, to care for ageing parents:

*[but] your parents, can you go and leave them? My youngest sister has openly said you'll be the one who has to look after mum and dad! (Lindsey, NI).*

Because Lindsey's parents are currently in their fifties and in good health, there are clear tensions between the immediate employment and much later family domains of her life. Lindsey appears to be offering potential family obligations (sometime in the distant future) as justification to stay now. Indeed, Lindsey admits

*[I]t's scary to think you have to leave [home], you'll have to leave what you love at the minute (Lindsey, NL).*

This suggests that if her employment aspirations can be satisfied locally, she will stay. Lindsay's staying process is, therefore, similar yet different to that of Rachel, Rifka, or Alisa. Lindsey wishes to stay but the employment opportunity to allow her to do so may not arise. Rachel and Rifka envisaged leaving for employment but stayed because of an unexpected local employment opportunity. Although all three lack the agency to stay without the place-specific employment opportunities to match their staying aspirations (Kuhmonen et al., 2016), Alisa re-trained to match those available. Others might choose to work in sectors for which they are overqualified, if doing so enables them to stay.

Imke (NL) is contemplating a future union formation life stage, when mobility or immobility will be linked to that of her partner and their joint employment search. The couple's desire to stay is again conditional on the availability of local employment opportunities. Their individual or combined agency in the staying process is, therefore, limited. As Imke remarks "I don't have much choice."

### 4.3 | Staying as an attachment to (rural) place

Thus far, we have identified the importance of life events, relationships with others, and the ongoing nature of the staying process. A further factor emerges, that of "place" (Barcus & Brunn, 2010; Leopold et al., 2012; Rérat, 2014; Roin, 2015). Place, however, is particularly nuanced in the staying process and includes familial, physical, and social elements that represent strong senses of belonging. Here, we uncover senses of dwelling, nostalgia, and elective belonging. Young adult stayers either identify "with" or "against" the home place and the potential new residential area. Some while "identifying against" the rural home place elect to stay because considerations in other life domains out-weight the negatives of staying.

Family roots, memories, and a sense of home, what Rérat (2014) calls the reference space, are important. Many interviewees spoke of generations of family members who resided in the home area or farmed the same land. These deep family roots translate to a strong sense of attachment to the rural home place. Sharon (who is engaged to Rory) is not only strongly attached to the Clogher Valley:

*[Here] it's just home. It's just where we grew up and we're familiar with it. ... I want to stay here, definitely (Sharon, NI),*

but also to a particular house. She and Rory are renovating her grandmother's house to move into after marriage. This property has great sentimental value, and she recalled various personal and family moments (Antonisch, 2010) in it. As a child, Sharon was looked after by her granny when her mother was working and, in turn, Sharon helped to look after her granny before she died. Multiple generations of her family also lived in the house. The area and her grandmother's house are very much part of Sharon's past and future biography: It is where she belongs.

Amy and David too display a strong sense of attachment to family and possess deep family roots, which are part of their individual and

joint biographies. Not only were Amy's parents viewed (earlier) as providing valuable support with the imminent arrival of the couple's first child, but Amy describes herself as a "daddy's girl" and "home birdy." Staying in the home area is simply "a family thing" and "just normal." David too was brought up in the Clogher Valley and recounts that his father's parental home is "just down the road," his grandmother's "whole family was from around here," and that he has several aunts and uncles living nearby:

*we've been connected to this area for a long time (David, NI).*

By contrast, other young adults focus less on their ancestry and more on their attachment and sense of belonging to the rural place. As illustrated by Clare, who we introduced earlier as staying because of an obligation to care for her ill mother, some young adults "identify with" the rural:

*[the rural] it's as if you are glued to something, that's what you know and that's what you want ... I wouldn't feel comfy [comfortable] going anywhere else (Clare, NI).*

The rural seems part of who Clare is. She is not only familiar with the rural but perceives herself to be fixed to it. Although her caring responsibilities may explain why she has stayed in this specific place, her decision-making is also informed by a strong sense of rural belonging. For others, their rural attachment is more specific. Some focus on the physical or aesthetic qualities:

*"I think the forests are a really beautiful place to walk. ... this region, the agricultural area, it's open, wide. That appeals to me. Also because I'm used to it (Niels, NL) and*

*[The] landscape ... it's really beautiful ... it is really stunning ... the landscape and the history, it's really nice (Kieran, NI),*

others on its close-knit, family-spirited communities

*... you know the community, it's quite close-knit .... You know everyone. You know what to expect from them (Marieke, NL).*

*... if you were out there and someone was driving along, someone would stop—"well, what about you!" [say hello] You are never far from a conversation when you are living in the country (Shane, NI).*

These young stayers value the familiar, an attractive landscape, and a strong sense of community. The rural is reported in idyllic terms and is frequently contrasted with an alternative "other," that is, urban living.

*I see that everything's so individualistic [in the city], everyone is just racing past each other and live in such a hurry, and more and more money, well that gets me crazy and I think pfff, relax. ... I know this place, I know what I have here ... (Alisa, NL).*

*[Here] you are away from all the bullshit that comes with the town. ... Out here, everything moves a wee bit slower,*

*everything in the town is rushed, nobody takes time to do anything. ... I would consider here a far better place (Shane, NI).*

Whether this identifying against urban living explains the decision to stay or merely helps to justify the choices, these stayers have made is impossible to say. Nevertheless, rural place attributes feature as part of the staying process. It is worth remembering, however, that these same attributes—sense of community, close-knittedness, deep family roots—are reported as “claustrophobic” and a common reason for leaving by rural young out-migrants (Glendinning et al., 2003). Indeed, some who have stayed in the Clogher Valley and Oost-Groningen are highly critical of the rural, and “identify against” it. Kieran claims to

*live in the middle of nowhere ... here is very much old-fashioned ... narrow-minded ... It's definitely lacking on the social aspects ... if you are not going to the pub there's nothing really happening and even in the pub there's nothing happening! (Kieran, NI).*

Indeed, such is Kieran's dislike of the rural home place that he asserts

*If I was given the opportunity in the morning I would be gone (Kieran, NI).*

Kieran's employment in health and social care means he could easily secure work elsewhere if he is serious about leaving. Notwithstanding his bravado to leave, the social disadvantages that he associates with the rural lack the strength to dislodge Kieran's deep rooted familial ties to the area. These include a close relationship with his mother, a strong bond to the family farm, and a recognition that generations of his family are buried locally. Kieran's sense of belonging out-weights the negatives of staying:

*'... it's really geeky but ... the only reason I've stayed here is for family really. ... [A]nd ... as they [parents] are getting older too it gets a bit harder [to leave] ... I keep cattle as well, I work the farm so that's one of the main reasons I've stayed, they are more like pets the one's I have ... My parents want buried too in the local graveyard with my grandparents so you have that tie ... (Kieran, NI).*

Just as tensions are observed between the different domains of stayers' lives, in Kieran's case, we also witness tensions between the different elements of his home place. On the one hand, “nothing ever happens here,” and on the other hand, a strong sense of belonging.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

Immobility, and especially the process of staying, has for too long been viewed from a mobility perspective that places an emphasis on moving and devalues staying. In this exploratory study, we have sought to shed new and deeper insights into the staying processes of rural young adults. By doing so, we have responded to recent calls (Coulter et al., 2016; Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018) to reconceptualise staying as a process worthy of investigation in its own right. We have examined

staying in terms of stayers' biographies and linked lives, staying as a state of flux, and staying as an attachment to (rural) place.

Regarding the stayers' biographies, we find that staying processes are closely linked to specific life events and to the lives of others past, present, and future. Moreover, staying is not reducible to “still” versus “stuck” or “choice” versus “constraint.” Staying is something diverse, dynamic, and nuanced. It results from a complex interplay between competing influences and considerations, such as family, employment, obligations, sentimentality, familiarity, and rural place. Stayers negotiate multiple aspects of the rural place (familial, physical, and social) in relation to different domains of the self. In reconciling the competing influences, stayers acknowledge certain constraints. Structural constraints include the local employment market. At subsequent life stages, this might include the housing market or service provision. Linked lives too mean that decision-making needs to have regard to others (parents, partners, or children). There is also evidence of a blurring between mobility and immobility. Daily and virtual mobilities, the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006), permit staying. Young adults stay while commuting to university or work, and a parent can maintain contact with children living elsewhere with an ex-partner.

The process of staying is ongoing and in a state of flux. Staying is not a once in a lifetime decision: It has been, and is expected to be, renegotiated at subsequent life stages (cf. Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018; Hjälms, 2014; Ye, 2018). Staying now, on occasions, was explained with reference to possible future events, some of which were a considerable time away (such as ageing parents). This is in line with Savage's (2010, 133) conclusion that “... it is people's sense of the future which is a telling indicator of their relationship to place, rather than of the past.”

In terms of attachment to rural place, we observe elements of elective belonging—alongside nostalgia and dwelling—in the biographies of young adults. Whereas Savage (2010) reports elective belonging in relation to newcomers, we identify it also among locally born and bred stayers. Staying is not something that just happens (as a result of failing to move). To the contrary, young adult stayers exert considerable human agency and elect to belong to the rural. Elective belonging seems to be informed by senses of nostalgia and dwelling. These mostly relate to the familial and social qualities of the rural past, present, and future. In contrast to how newcomer families with children become stayers (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018), we find among young adult stayers that family ties seem to be decisive. Both newcomers and young adult stayers identify with and against elements of rural social life (“you know what to expect” versus “it's very narrow-minded”). Interestingly, in identifying against urban areas, our young stayers report nostalgically about the values that they perceive have been lost from cities but retained in the rural (sense of community; more relaxed pace of life, etc.). The interviewees display rural embeddedness or dwelling. The rural is home. It is a given place where they dwell happily. In some instances, stayers seek to mask their elective choice to stay for fear of how they may look. Such is the perceived negativity associated with young people staying in the rural that stayers do not wish to appear as lacking ambition or having been left behind.

Understanding the staying processes of these young people can lead to improved policy interventions to help stem the ongoing rural

brain drain and ageing of rural populations. Inadvertently, policymakers may view staying from a mobility perspective: Stayers have “failed to leave” or “been left behind.” Young adults are not always recognised as a rural asset that should be retained. Yet many are highly educated, possess a strong sense of belonging based on familial ties that go back several generations, and exert considerable human agency to stay. Such young people are arguably the lifeline of many rural communities. However, the availability of local employment opportunities to match their qualifications was repeatedly reported as a structural constraint.

Future research on immobility and staying might take several avenues. A larger sample of stayers at different life stages would permit further refinement and understanding of the specific staying nuances associated with each life stage. There is also scope for a longitudinal study that compares the individual/couple's decision-making processes as they transcend one life stage to the next. Why do some cohort members stay, while others leave? The links between the individual's ability and opportunity to stay warrants investigation alongside the relative importance of nostalgia, dwelling, and elective belonging. It would also seem appropriate to tease out the different aspects of place and their role within the staying process, for example, to compare the staying processes between urban and rural contexts, home village and home region, and in different international rural contexts. Finally, the stayers' experiences and their contributions to the sustainability of rural areas are useful lines of inquiry.

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