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# The journey of staying: A transitional and mobility perspective on the staying rural preferences of rural young adults

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**RQ:** How do rural young adults in  
Oost-Groningen and Clogher Valley who  
have already started their employment  
career, but still reside with their parents  
or alone, reflect on their past, present and  
future staying rural preferences, and how  
do these relate to experiences and  
connections elsewhere?

## Abstract

This article presents insight into rural young adults' reflections on their past, present and future staying rural preferences (transitional perspective) and how they relate to their experiences and connections outside the rural home area (mobility perspective). Using a biographical approach, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with young employed adults living with their parents or alone in two rural areas in the Netherlands and Northern Ireland. Their transitional perspectives, which were agent-centred, revealed that staying rural preferences do not evolve as a uniform process, fluctuating instead between 'messy' periods of stability and instability, entailing multiple alternations between deliberate and 'just-happened' periods. In line with the 'new mobilities paradigm', the participants' mobility perspectives confirmed the relevance of past residential experiences and current non-residential mobility for analysing staying preferences. The article concludes that staying rural is a complex, (unstable) evolving, spatially relational and (only partly) conscious process.

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**KEYWORDS**

agency, life-course events, non-residential (daily) mobility, North-western Europe, residential biographies, (reverse) place elasticity

**INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of ‘staying rural’ among young adults is increasingly viewed as a meaningful topic within public debates and academia (e.g., Forsberg, 2019). In this article, we seek to give nuance to the prevailing policy focus on persuading rural migrants to return through an exploration of the perspectives of young adults who have always stayed in their rural home areas and those who have briefly lived elsewhere.

Young adults experience many events and transitions during their life course, which influence their residential decisions. Numerous studies have addressed the staying rural preferences of young adults. We aim to contribute to this literature by focusing specifically on the transitional aspects of these preferences and elucidating how young adults anticipate future potential life-course transitions. Moreover, the influence of residential experiences outside rural home areas and mobility within daily life on staying rural preferences remains underexplored.

Here, we analyse 12 biographical semi-structured interviews conducted with young adults in rural areas of Oost-Groningen (OG) in the Netherlands and Clogher Valley (CV) in Northern Ireland (Figure 1). These interviews yield insight into how rural young adults reflect on their past, present and future staying rural preferences and how these preferences relate to experiences and connections outside the rural home area. We apply transitional and mobility perspectives to explore the phenomenon of staying rural. In doing so, we aim to unpack the fluid process of staying within different regional contexts, considering two distinct geographical contexts to avoid idiosyncrasy of the findings.

A transitional perspective on staying highlights the non-static and non-linear nature of staying rural preferences during the initial transitional phase of adulthood. We assume that staying ‘exists



**FIGURE 1** The case regions and selected study areas.

as part of our past, our present, and our future; as part of our biography' (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993, p. 337). Stockdale et al. (2018) find that rural young adults may remain in a 'state of flux' with regard to their staying decisions, renegotiating their choices over time. Building on this observation, we include reflections on childhood memories in our study.

A transitional perspective is also aligned with the notion that staying is an active choice (Hjälms, 2014), indicating that agency can also change over time. Stockdale et al. (2018) report that whether or not the staying decision is deliberate varies among rural stayers. To extend this finding, rather than focusing on differences in agency among young adults, we explore how the level of agency may evolve through shifts in staying preferences during a young adult's transitional phase.

Applying a mobility perspective on staying, we acknowledge that young adults' staying preferences in their rural home areas could be influenced by a continuous negotiation between staying and seeking experiences and connections elsewhere. We thus build on the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller & Urry, 2006), in which mobility and immobility are perceived as fluid. In doing so, we conceptualised staying as a 'journey', which stresses staying as a process and as a balance between mobility and immobility. However, within the literature on staying rural, the application of the 'new mobilities paradigm' is mostly restricted to studies on (potential) rural returnees. Consequently, Stockdale and Haartsen (2018) stress that daily and virtual relations with other areas remain unexplored in the staying rural debate. For instance, they noted that 'it is important to also ask, does an ability to commute on a daily or weekly basis enable an individual or family to stay?' (p. 4). The same argument could be applied to relatively short residential experiences, such as internships abroad.

To understand staying rural preferences from both transitional and mobility perspectives, we focus on a specific group of young adults, who had just embarked on their careers and were still living in the parental home or alone. A study focusing on this group has relevance for the staying rural literature, as this group, which has already made critical career decisions, is expected to make subsequent decisions regarding their future places of residence and partners. Young adults who have already begun their careers are likely to have more tangible views about the future, compared with their peers who are still students. Furthermore, young adults living with their parents, or alone, are more likely to be engaged in a process of renegotiating their (non-)residential mobility because they have not yet invested in a shared life, compared with young adults who reside with their partners. Finally, more knowledge about this particular group could provide useful inputs for regional policies aimed at supporting young adults who are transitioning towards staying rural.

In the next section, we present a theoretical overview of the literature on staying rural, with a focus on the evolution of staying preferences and the role of experiences and connections elsewhere in this process. The third section describes the interview and coding process. Subsequently, we present the various transitions in the development of staying preferences of the young adults whom we interviewed, showing how their preferences were influenced by their experiences and connections elsewhere. Finally, the concluding section explores the implications of our findings for the debate on young adults staying rural.

## THEORY

This section presents a theoretical discussion on staying rural considered from transitional and mobility perspectives. The first sub-section focuses on the use of individual biographies to understand the transitional nature of staying. We distinguish between gradual, stable and unstable staying preferences. Following the 'new mobilities paradigm', the second sub-section examines

how mobility and staying are intertwined, focusing on the roles of residential and non-residential mobility in the formation of staying preferences.

## Towards a transitional perspective on staying rural

The acknowledgement that staying is a worthy research subject has prompted the recognition that young adults are motivated to stay rural by a diverse range of factors (e.g., Matysiak, 2018; Rerat, 2014; Thissen et al., 2010; Wolfe et al., 2020). While attempting to make sense of diverse residential choices, young adults can experience internal struggles between their own preferences and different life domains. For instance, they may have to choose between employment (e.g., Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006) and linked lives (e.g., Cook & Cuervo, 2020). This dilemma can lead to their being 'predisposed to accept lower aspirations concerning their work life because of the benefits of being surrounded by family and friends' (Jamieson, 2000, p. 218).

The use of individual biographies has been advocated within the (im)mobility literature (e.g., Ni Laore, 2000) to understand the diversity of residential choices, leading to the recognition that a staying preference can be continuously renegotiated as it develops (e.g., Hjälm, 2014; Stockdale et al., 2018). Importantly, stable staying preferences are not excluded within the notion of transitional staying preferences. In reality, staying preferences, which are the result of 'retain factors' (Schewel, 2020), tend to be stable, as they are often fixed and rooted, keeping individuals in place. Even those stayers who are more flexible in their preferences may consider fixed places as stable anchors in their mobile lives (Gustafson, 2001).

The biographical approach reported in the (im)mobility literature has also resulted in the foregrounding of agency during the life course (e.g., Stockdale et al., 2018). In addition to pointing to differences in individuals' agency, the life-course literature has revealed the variability of agency during a specific individual's life course. Variability of agency is related to the extent to which an individual is conscious of the passage of time. Sanchez-Mira and Bernardi (2021) identified three perceptions of time relating to human agency. A multidirectional time perception entails focusing on the remembered past and the anticipated future motivating present decisions. For instance, some young adults may focus on the past when making a decision to stay, whereas others may focus more strongly on the future. A telescopic time perception entails a selective focus on certain periods in the past, which motivate future decisions. Thus, young adults may focus on happy periods during their childhood, which motivate their place attachment and choice to stay. An elastic time perception entails an inclusion of periods from the past whose passages in time are perceived to be fast or slow. For example, periods perceived by young adults as passing quickly may be associated with rushed decision-making and an 'it just happened' perception of time.

Young adults may also shift from a *laissez-faire* approach to residential decisions to one that is deliberate and planned. Cairns (2017) argued that young adults experience the pressure of 'spatial reflexivity' when they internalise societal expectations of achieving personal and professional development through moving away from rural areas. To some extent, this approach to decision-making can be considered passive and thus a less deliberate choice. Some young adults may move out of rural areas because doing so is the norm without considering options to stay and only making a deliberate choice to return in the future. However, others who return may have actually made a deliberate move at a particular time with the intention of returning later. It is important to stress that whereas 'spatial reflexivity' intuitively engages more with the mobility perspective on staying (see second sub-section of theory), we focus on the transitional and temporal dimension of 'spatial reflexivity'.

Finally, a transitional perspective on staying potentially includes an unstable process. The life-course literature also highlights the role of unexpected personal life events (e.g., Sanchez-Mira & Bernardi, 2021). When using a biographical approach, events are viewed as those moments that are selected retrospectively by individuals as critical moments for making sense of their past, current and future choices. Thus, events are selected and interpreted to enable the construction of post hoc rationalisations (e.g., Halfacree & Rivera, 2012). Thomassen (2021) and Stockdale et al. (2018) demonstrate the importance of unplanned life events as well as personal and family events for the staying rural choices of young adults.

## Towards a mobility perspective on staying rural

The mobility perspective on staying builds on the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller & Urry, 2006), which has fostered a relative notion of place in a mobile world in which mobile and rooted notions of place are intertwined (e.g., Di Masso et al., 2019, p. 126). Scholars under the 'new mobilities paradigm' suggest the classic notion of migration as a one-time decision between two fixed locations is inadequate, as migration is more fluid and dynamic than previously thought. The 'new mobilities paradigm' asserts that the division between a static residence and mobility is an inadequate representation of the reality of (im)mobility. In reality, place attachment is not always strongly related to the duration of residence in one place (Barcus & Brunn, 2010). Gustafson (2001, p. 647) observed that 'even the most rooted among the respondents also might at times appreciate mobility, and those who had travelled a lot, moved around a lot, or worked abroad still often had specific places that mattered to them'. Easthope (2009) stresses that among young adults, both mobility and place attachment are pertinent factors in identity formation.

Numerous studies on residential mobility and staying rural have focused on young adults' motives for returning to their rural home areas, mostly after finishing their higher education elsewhere (e.g., Matysiak, 2018; Rerat, 2014; Simoes et al., 2019). Despite having resided elsewhere, some young adults retain a mental perception of never having left (Haartsen & Thissen, 2014). While residing elsewhere, they conversely maintain their attachment to their home area. This process can be explained using the concept of 'place elasticity' (Barcus & Brunn, 2010), which refers to maintaining relations with the home area by individuals who reside at a distance from their home areas.

While young adults who undergo a residential experience elsewhere may sustain strong ties with their home areas, they also have opportunities to compare distant places with their homes. Schewel (2020) coin the term 'repel factors' to describe awareness of conditions elsewhere that diminish the aspiration to migrate, thereby reinforcing the decision to stay. For example, graduates may return after becoming aware of urban repell factors, which enhance their appreciation of their rural home areas.

In the 'new mobilities paradigm', mobility may also be viewed as a form of capital that enables staying. Of particular interest for this article is the perspective of 'appropriation' of mobility within the concept of 'motility' introduced by Kaufmann et al. (2004). 'Appropriation' refers to how individuals interpret and act on the possibility of being mobile, which also includes staying as an option. This is closely related to the concept of 'spatial reflexivity' and incorporates the mobility perspective on staying. The concept of 'appropriation' of mobility was also applied by Mærsk et al. (2021), who introduce the term 'symbolic mobility capital' to explain how a residential experience elsewhere can provide a rationale for young adults to stay in their peripheral home area. This rationale is driven by the perception of a 'mobility imperative' (Farrugia, 2016), premised on the

belief that being mobile is necessary to move ahead in life. Young adults' experiences of living elsewhere may trigger a sense of appreciation of often stigmatised rural areas. When returning, a 'symbolic mobility capital' gives them an excuse to stay.

The 'new mobilities paradigm' has encouraged geographers to consider how leisure activities performed elsewhere as well as daily and virtual mobilities enable residential immobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Stockdale et al. (2018) have shown how commuting to work enables young adults to stay rural. Moreover, the residential mobility literature has revealed that information technologies can both enhance and limit residential mobility (e.g., Cooke & Shuttleworth, 2018). Haukanes (2013) argues that while rural youth have no access to an urban lifestyle, 'access to global youth culture and its attendant technologies make their daily routines and forms of communication similar to urban youth' (p. 202). Thus, virtual mobility enables young people to stay rural while still being able to enjoy the same level of social interaction as their urban peers.

To gain a deeper understanding of how non-residential mobility enables people to stay rural, Haartsen and Stockdale (2021) introduce the concept of 'reverse place elasticity' in addition to 'place elasticity'. Whereas 'place elasticity' enables individuals to reside elsewhere while maintaining relations with the home area, 'reverse place elasticity' enables them to stay in the home area while maintaining relations with other places. In the case of 'reverse place elasticity', other places possess amenities that are not available at home. Occasional visits, as opposed to moving out, fulfil particular needs that stayers cannot find in the home area, thus enabling them to stay.

In sum, young adults may develop 'heterolocal identities' (Halfacree, 2012) encompassing both rurality and urbanity. Rural youth may consider 'the rural idyll' and 'the rural dull' as offering the best of both worlds rather than being in conflict (Rye, 2006). Practically, this means that they experience the rural idyll while living in a rural area and visit an urban area to overcome the rural dull. However, perceptions of the relation between place attachment and mobility may differ. Some may experience the best of both worlds, in line with 'reverse place elasticity', whereas others may feel that they have to choose between being rooted or being on the move (Gustafson, 2001). For the latter, relations with other places could remind them of residential options elsewhere, thus potentially instigating a residential move.

## METHODOLOGY

### Approach

This article is part of the STAYin(g)Rural Project and is based on 12 biographical semi-structured interviews conducted with young adults living in the selected study areas, namely, the rural areas of Oost-Groningen in the Netherlands and Clogher Valley in Northern Ireland. At the time of the interviews, all the respondents had just embarked on their careers and were not yet cohabiting with partners. They were all born in the study areas or in the case regions. Our intention was not to analyse similarities and differences between the areas. Instead, we aimed to unpack the fluid process of staying in different regional contexts. Two geographical contexts were included in this article to avoid idiosyncrasy of the findings.

During the interviews, we applied a biographical approach, which generated a rich storyline of the lives of young adults thus far and their views on future residential choices. The interviews lasted between 2 and 3 hours and were conducted online or in person from December 2020 to July 2021. Although the interviews were held during the period when pandemic-related restrictions were in place, the impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is not the focus of this

article. The pandemic may have influenced perceptions of rural areas, and hence young adults' reflections on their staying rural preferences, but we did not explicitly focus on this topic in our interviews. The interview guide was constructed to minimise the role of COVID-19, and respondents were asked to discount the impact of COVID-19 in their reflections. It is noteworthy that all the interviewees already resided in the study area or had already returned to the study areas prior to the onset of COVID-19.

## Case regions: Clogher Valley and Oost-Groningen

In this section, we describe some features of the study areas to elucidate the context in which staying preferences are formed. These features were identified using our own survey data from the STAYin(g)Rural Project and fieldwork in the study areas. We conducted intensive research in the study areas, including preparatory work and a pilot study to develop the interview guide. In addition, in the context of the STAYin(g)Rural Project, we conducted interviews with individuals belonging to different age groups, including those who had established families and the elderly, and with policymakers.

Both study areas have experienced a population decline and outmigration of young adults. However, the project survey results indicated that the population of Oost-Groningen is characterised by a higher level of residential mobility than the population of Clogher Valley. Hence, Clogher Valley stands out as being an area in which a large proportion of the population has always stayed in the area or in a rural area elsewhere.

The fieldwork conducted for this article indicated that the landscapes and residential structures of these two areas differed. Whereas almost 25% of households in Clogher Valley are still engaged in agriculture, the project survey data revealed that agriculture is practised by only 5% of the population in Oost-Groningen. Our fieldwork indicated that the settlement structure of Clogher Valley mostly comprises hamlets surrounded by dispersed plots used for small-scale farming, whereas the settlement structure of Oost-Groningen mostly comprises larger villages surrounded by more equally allocated large-scale farms. The project survey data indicated that a tradition of self-built tenure on family-owned land exists in Clogher Valley, whereas public rent tenure is prevalent in villages in Oost-Groningen.

## Recruitment of respondents

Respondents for this article were recruited by following up on a random household survey, which also included young adults. In addition, young adults were recruited via their parents, who had participated in the survey, and via organisations, such as village sport associations. This resulted in 12 interviews with young adults who met the criteria for this article.

Appendix Table A1 presents a descriptive overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. We applied pseudonyms for the respondents using the abbreviations CV (Clogher Valley) and OG (Oost-Groningen). Respondents were equally divided with regard to places within the study areas, age, education level and gender. Because most young adults in Clogher Valley either reside with their parents or with a partner, living alone is much less common here than in Oost-Groningen. All the respondents from Clogher Valley were still living with their parents, whereas three out of the seven respondents from Oost-Groningen were still living with their parents. We excluded young adults who were already residing with a partner.



Specifically, we deemed that young adults who were still living with their parents, or alone, would offer the most insight into the process of staying, even if they had partners. We posited that more potential life events lay ahead of these individuals than young adults living with a partner who already made more definitive future residential moves.

## Interview guide

The interviews followed a biographical approach and addressed multiple domains within the respondents' lives. Each interview started with the respondent recalling their (residential) history, including memories of early childhood, growing up and adolescence, and educational and employment choices up to the time of the interview. Specific attention was paid to the respondents' planned and unplanned experiences. Subsequently, the respondents shared their views on their relationships with other people in the area and their feelings of belonging. Next, we focused on non-residential mobility extending from daily activities to leisure-related activities. In addition, the interviews addressed family members' and friends' expectations of staying or leaving. Finally, they elicited the respondents' future residential plans and their perceptions relating to these plans. These perceptions included the rationale or motivation for these plans, decisions and negotiations and/or trade-offs that could be required and with whom, and how they were linked to the upcoming stage in their life course.

Importantly, we limit the role of post hoc rationalisation of residential choices by using different types of questions to elicit motivations for residential choices. Accordingly, we asked whether respondents would feel at home elsewhere, whether they had reconsidered their choices, how others perceived their choices and what they would miss if they were to leave. Furthermore, we aimed to ask multiple follow-up questions to unpack the core motivations behind residential decision-making.

The interview guide was linguistically validated to harmonise meanings expressed in the Dutch and English language. The guide was originally created in English and then translated into Dutch. Following translation, words, phrases and concepts that could not be translated easily were adjusted in the English version until they matched Dutch expressions. The interviews were conducted by two interviewers who spoke the respondents' language and were familiar with the local context and national culture.

## Analysis

The qualitative software *Atlas.ti* was used to analyse the interview transcripts. The interviews were transcribed in the interviewees' native language but were analysed using English codes by the first author of this article who speaks both languages. Places mentioned by the respondents were sometimes left out or altered. Initially, we intended to use an inductive approach for coding the transcripts in relation to each of the broader themes covered in the interview guide. We aimed to achieve in vivo coding, that is, very detailed codes using the respondents' words. Although the semi-structured interview guide was deductively oriented, we started out with an inductive approach to remain open to the respondents' unique biographies, which fostered a transitional perspective on staying. Subsequently, a more deductive approach was applied, entailing theoretical concepts. This approach was aimed at revealing general patterns by merging similar in vivo codes to generate more abstract codes.

## RESULTS

### Past, present and anticipated future residential biographies

Appendix Table A2 presents an overview of the biographies of the 12 young adults who are the subjects of this article. Their diversity indicates the importance of retaining a nuanced perspective on staying rural preferences. Their staying rural preferences entailed different residential histories, covering a range of situations from being rooted to being mobile and semi-mobile. In addition, some had a rural upbringing, whereas others had been raised in towns within the rural areas under study.

The results further illustrate a nuanced notion of staying by encompassing transitional and mobility perspectives on staying preferences. Notably, individual biographies can vary, reflecting different transitional and mobility perspectives. Young adults can be in a 'state of flux' (Stockdale et al., 2018) between stability and instability, moving between 'roots and routes' (Gustafson, 2001) when negotiating their staying preferences. Hence, the following sections provide different perspectives on staying and are not to be interpreted as a typology.

### Shifting staying preferences

This section discusses the evolution of staying preferences over time. Our analysis of the interviews revealed four transitional variations of staying preferences: stable, developmental, unstable and ambiguous. The first three variations were aligned with the theories described in the first sub-section of the theory. Although an ambiguous preference was not discussed in the theoretical section, we considered this preference to be indicative of a more open or uncertain staying preference relating to the future among some respondents. It is noteworthy that young adults' preferences may change over time.

### Stability-driven staying preferences

Only Arjen (OG) and Milan (OG) perceived their staying preference as stable since their childhood, thus highlighting the importance of a transitional perspective. Reflecting on why he felt at home, Arjen referred to home as 'yeah something simple; I do know otherwise'. This statement indicates a relative passive attitude towards residential choices, compared with the attitudes of other young adults. Arjen and Milan also stressed that staying is taken for granted within their social networks and is never discussed.

Nevertheless, perceptions of stability differed. Whereas Arjen expressed the strongest passive attitude of just letting life happen as long it is rural, Milan's attitude was more deliberate, as he intentionally picked a subject that enabled him to study and work nearby. In addition, he proactively searched for a job in the region while he was still a student. By contrast, Arjen referred to his girlfriend as the one who would make the decision on staying for him. Thus, stable staying preferences can coexist with either deliberate or 'just-happened' attitudes. In line with the findings of Hjälml (2014) and Stockdale et al. (2018), we found that a stable staying preference can indeed be an active choice, but the examples here also reveal passive decision-making, especially when staying is taken for granted within the individual's social network.

## Development-driven staying preferences

This sub-section elaborates on a more gradual process in which young adults developed a staying preference. A substantial proportion of our respondents developed greater appreciation towards their home areas as they grew older, sometimes in conjunction with being away. For example, Lisa (OG) became more appreciative of her rural home area after she returned there and started a serious relationship with someone from elsewhere who was willing to move:

My perception of [urban] social life has also changed because I give less importance to it now [in the home area]. That is why I lived in the city. And now I prefer to live here. And I do think [that] starting a relationship has changed this. (Lisa, OG)

It appears that the development of a staying preference occurs through active choices, but it is also important to point out that some young adults acknowledged that the development of their staying preferences was associated with choosing comfort and being afraid to leave. Although Jeroen (OG) still had the desire to leave, he admitted to fear leaving. He stated that he had become increasingly aware of the value of having his family nearby and deliberately selected a stable local governmental job.

In addition to drawing attention to the distinction between deliberate or ‘just-happened’ choices (Stockdale et al., 2018), the interviews revealed a transition of the latter into deliberate residential choices among some young adults as illustrated in Kevin’s reflections on his staying preference:

I think that it [staying preference] was formed subconsciously in my youth. But it became more conscious when I wanted to take the step of buying a house [here]. (Kevin, OG)

An initial ‘just-happened’ perception was also apparent in the case of young adults whose departure was in line with the expectation of leaving to be able to move ahead in life:

To get decent jobs you need to go ‘farther afield’. [...] My granddad used to say: ‘if you stay [in the village], you get paid by the hour, but if you go up the road a wee bit, you will get a salary’. (Lydia, CV)

In addition to Cairns’ (2017) notion of ‘spatial reflexivity’, these expectations of leaving illustrate a temporal version of ‘spatial reflexivity’. Some young adults initially thought they would end up elsewhere. They were career-driven and even selected a study option just to get away without considering their own preferences. It was only while developing their identities during a later phase that they made more deliberate choices, placing less importance on their career or deciding to commute to be able to stay in their rural homes.

In most cases in which young adults showed an inclination to stay, they seemed to experience their early transition to adulthood as a period that quickly passed by. By contrast, they experienced their transition from studies to work as occurring at a slower phase, recalling more detailed memories about their choices. This finding, which is in agreement with that of Sanchez-Mira and Bernardi (2021), reveals the need to distinguish elastic time in the development of staying preferences.

Finally, it is important to note that developmental preferences require some stable ground to evolve. The staying preferences of some young adults had already acquired stability even

though they were not conscious of this. They became more conscious of the fact that they had always appreciated their rural homes retroactively through their recall of selectively happy memories of their childhood. This finding points to a telescopic perspective of time (Sanchez-Mira & Bernardi, 2021), meaning the respondents selectively zoomed into the past to make sense of their future.

## Instability-driven staying preferences

Whereas the previous sub-sections have described stable or gradual staying preferences, unexpected events also play an influential role. Some young adults experienced unexpected events, which strengthened their inclination towards staying, revealing an overlap between the gradual development of a staying preference and instability.

Several interviews revealed events that (1) disrupted but eventually strengthened a staying preference, (2) triggered a more subconscious staying preference and (3) transformed a leaving expectation or preference into a staying preference. In general, whereas the event itself was experienced as one that 'just happened', subsequent choices were made more deliberately. These shifts further indicate the relevance of adopting a biographical approach to assess the diversity of agency among individual young adults.

Kevin (OG) and Imke (OG) each experienced a disrupting event that influenced their staying preference. Kevin had a serious accident, leading to negative perceptions about him in his locality. This experience led him to question his intention to stay, stimulating a temporary move to Canada. Only after he returned, he was able to appreciate the support he received from sections of the community, which reinforced his choice to stay. Despite experiencing doubts regarding their staying preference, and even leaving temporarily, the reflections of both Kevin and Imke indicated that these disruptions strengthened their staying preference.

Aaron (CV) experienced three events, which had the combined effect of triggering a relatively subconscious staying preference. Whereas Aaron had always appreciated his local friends and close-knit community, he was not averse to living in several other places in connection with his studies, jobs and ex-partner's home. However, after breaking up with his partner, he moved back home and lived with his parents:

I suppose I protected my mental health at that time as it was a pretty tough time. [...] Then my mum struggled with her health, and she is very much dependent on us as a family to look after her [...]. That is a big part of the reason why I stayed as well; to assist with that. (Aaron, CV)

It was only after experiencing these disrupting events that Aaron became aware of just how much he appreciated the familiarity and comfort of being close to his family, community and rural environment. Now, he fears losing time because he perceives it will take time to build something familiar elsewhere.

Lisa (OG), Sadie (CV) and Tom (CV) experienced transformative events, which induced a shift from leaving as an expectation and preference to a strong staying preference. They initially thought that they would live elsewhere on account of their jobs but returned home because of health issues. They perceived themselves as 'slipping' into staying and only figured out that they actually liked the rural context after the occurrence of specific events.

Sadie slipped into staying by engaging in farming because her father developed health issues at the time that Sadie returned after she herself had developed mental health issues:

I had no sort of engagement with any animals or farming before that. I guess I did not even really have any engagement with the countryside [...]. So, I would struggle to make that connection between where I live now and how happy I am because of my upbringing here. It is a strange thing to think about. (Sadie, CV)

The unplanned engagement in the farm strengthened Sadie's attachment to farming activities and the environment, which puzzled her because she had not experienced any of these bonds during her childhood and was mostly attached to the main town in the area.

By contrast, Lisa had nostalgic feelings about her childhood, recalling playing in meadows and climbing trees. Initially, she had no difficulties about deliberately leaving her home area because of bad memories about her parents' divorce, but this unhappy biographical event was discounted in favour of a reappraisal of happy childhood memories, which motivated her current staying preference. Once again, the salience of a telescopic perception of time helped Lisa to create a deliberate staying preference that was acceptable for her.

Finally, Tom (CV) ended up in the rural Clogher Valley by coincidence following a breakup with his partner and after searching for affordable rental accommodation. Although Tom grew up in a town on the edge of Clogher Valley, to his surprise he greatly enjoyed the rural environment and community, which prompted a preference to stay. Although Tom did have pleasant memories about going to a rural primary school located outside the town, these memories interestingly appeared to remain in his subconscious as he did not refer to them as a motivating factor during the interview.

In alignment with the findings of previous studies about the staying choices of rural young adults (e.g., Thomassen, 2021), the interviews confirmed the role of influential events in staying choices. Moreover, they point to three types of events that affect the process of developing staying preferences: those that trigger, disrupt or transform a staying preference. A multidirectional perception of time (Sanchez-Mira & Bernardi, 2021) appears to be useful for advancing understanding the role of these events. Young adults who experienced triggering and disruptive events focused more on the past, whereas young adults who experienced transformative events were more focused on the future.

## Ambiguous staying preferences

Some young adults experienced a more ambiguous staying preference, such as postponing or being unsure of where they would live, which was associated with a more uncertain future. Kevin (OG) postponed his choice until his girlfriend finished studying. Expecting a future trade-off, his girlfriend preferred to move to a peri-urban setting near the home area, whereas Kevin preferred to stay in his home village close to a farm, which he was deeply attached to and where he had been working since childhood. Iris (OG) had a temporal staying preference. She and her boyfriend had deliberately postponed their preferred choice of leaving to take care of both their grandmothers. In addition, they preferred to have more financial stability before leaving the area. Although they both felt that they were outcasts in the community and preferred another landscape, they had decided to stay for the time being. These cases indicate that a staying preference can be

re-evaluated later on, highlighting a state of being ‘in flux’ when making sense of future residential choices (Stockdale et al., 2018).

Finally, Jeroen (OG) still had doubts about staying in the area or migrating to Australia. Although he was more inclined towards the comfort and security of his home area as he grew older, he still had a dream of moving out. Maintaining strong relations with Australia, which he visited frequently, enabled him to keep this dream alive. This example shows that the transitional and mobility perspectives on staying are closely related, as will become clearer in the next section.

## Shifting staying preferences influenced by residential mobility

This section focuses on the role of residential mobility in staying preferences, revealing how an individual’s staying preferences are influenced while residing elsewhere and after returning.

### Staying preferences influenced by residing elsewhere

In consonance with the findings of Barcus and Brunn (2010) and Haartsen and Thissen (2014), some interviews provided further empirical evidence of ‘place elasticity’, which ensured that some young adults resided elsewhere but were never mentally and emotionally detached. While residing in Belfast, Sadie (CV) and Lydia (CV) kept visiting their parents during most weekends, partly because of their family responsibilities. Although they both expected to leave permanently because of their employment, the visits ensured that they never definitively ruled out going back. The remaining connections with home created a fundament for the subsequent development of a staying preference, which in the case of Sadie was also stimulated by unplanned events.

The case of Aaron (CV) illustrates ‘place elasticity’ without frequent visits. While residing elsewhere, Aaron voluntarily managed the social media account of his football club in his home village. Aaron had always been socially attached to his home area since childhood and stressed the centrality of his football club as a gateway into a larger network:

Certainly, a football club would connect me to a lot of my friends, and, you know, quite a number of them are local but also moved for work or for one reason or another, [though] mostly [for] work. But they are still very proud of their local area, and I would still be keen to keep in touch with them. I suppose [I could do that] with social media, and that is certainly a good thing for me. (Aaron, CV)

Despite his strong social attachments, Aaron had no difficulties leaving the area for employment and to be with his ex-partner. The maintenance of social bonds likely helped Aaron to consider the option of staying after he was forced to return to his parents because of a breakup and mental health issues.

### Staying preferences influenced by or after returning to the home area

A substantial number of our respondents reported greater appreciation of their home areas after returning from other areas. In the case of Imke (OG) and Kevin (OG), a temporal period of residing elsewhere to get away from a challenging personal situation helped them to become open

again and to appreciate the social support that they received within their social networks and communities. This in turn strengthened their staying preference.

In the case of Lisa (OG) and Sadie (CV), it was only when they returned home for health reasons that they started to appreciate the security and comfort of their rural home areas with their peaceful environments. After returning, they compared these qualities with those of the busier urban environment. It is thus interesting to observe how some young adults actually became committed only after returning to their home areas. This finding is in line with that of Schewel (2020), revealing that young adults can develop a staying preference via repel factors elsewhere. In the case of our respondents, they did so after comparing places where they had previously resided.

In accordance with the ‘appropriation’ of mobility (Kaufmann et al., 2004) and the findings of Mærsk et al. (2021), some young adults reflected on their past residential choices with reference to the symbolic value of having spent some time working or doing an internship elsewhere after their studies. This experience elsewhere somehow fulfilled the expectation of the ‘mobility imperative’, seemingly enabling them to stay while expressing their wishes to explore more places and obtain better-paid employment elsewhere.

The clearest example of using ‘symbolic mobility capital’ to stay was provided by Jeroen (OG), who openly identified himself as a unique person within the community based on his past residential mobility:

There are people who are jealous and say they would also love to have the same thoughts [of residing elsewhere] whenever they wanted to, but they could not and I did. I took it up and went alone. I went there for a longer period. And others said things like ‘Oh, I would also have liked that. It is very brave of you to do that’. (Jeroen, OG)

As discussed earlier, Jeroen was also afraid to give up his familiar home area and even identified himself using a negative reference to permanent leavers ‘who just need that constant trigger for something new’. At the same time, he was proud of the fact that he had lived elsewhere and others did not, which seemed to allow him to stay.

## **Shifting staying preferences influenced by non-residential mobility**

This sub-section focuses on the role of non-residential mobility in the formation of staying preferences, covering a range of mobility patterns from infrequent ones, such as weekend trips, to frequent ones, such as commuting to work and online contacts. The interviews provide empirical evidence of the concept of ‘reverse place elasticity’ proposed by Haartsen and Stockdale (2021). Some young adults experienced ‘reverse place elasticity’, which influenced their staying preference. Overall, our findings show the relevance of the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ to stress the symbiosis of residential immobility with non-residential mobility.

### **Daily and virtual mobility-driven preferences**

A substantial proportion of our respondents were very positive about their areas’ accessibility. They displayed a relaxed mindset about travelling long distances to visit friends elsewhere, which

made it easier for them to stay. These visits also made it easier for them to leave because they could easily accept longer trips to be with their families and friends in their home areas.

Furthermore, several young adults perceived holidays and weekend trips to other places as adding value to their lives. These young adults stressed their strong desire to understand other places for their self-development and as a reflection of their lifestyles. Iris (OG) reflected on the added value of exploring places through visits to her friends in cities in other parts of the Netherlands:

A weekend in Amsterdam, in The Hague; all that is fun. Normally you would do and see things like a regular tourist. But when you have friends there, you engage in their lives and can stay longer. You get to know other people. Perhaps you encounter another cultural perception. [...] Because here [Oost-Groningen], you miss that multicultural [aspect] a bit, I think. (Iris, OG)

Despite the added value of visits to other places, Iris (OG) and Lisa (OG) admitted that they had mixed feelings. They explained that the visits made it more difficult to stay, while also supporting them to stay. Jeroen (OG) even argued that holidays spent with friends in Australia undermined staying. These visits kept reminding him about his dream to migrate. At the same time, Jeroen was able to satisfy his adventurous personality through remote weekend trips and by participating in motor sports all over Europe. Only Lydia (CV) and Aaron (CV) truly experienced the best of both worlds in accordance with the concept of 'heterolocal identities' (Halfacree, 2012). They expressed their love for travelling to explore other places and cultures but also admitted they were homebirds.

## Staying preference through daily and virtual mobility

This sub-section explores the role of more frequent non-residential mobility in the staying preferences of young adults. For some respondents, commuting practices supported them in staying. After Lydia (CV) decided to return and eventually intended to stay in her rural home, she started a job, which required her to visit multiple places in the area. Although she initially found travelling difficult, she got used to it. This experience may have contributed to her continued consideration of her career in Belfast in the future, which would require longer commuting. Similarly, although Milan (OG) did not like commuting to work, he tolerated it, accepting that he needed to commute to combine his preferred job with a staying preference. However, he did accept a job in the region below his education level so that his commute would remain reasonable.

The strategy deployed by Sadie (CV) was particularly interesting. After returning to her home area and deciding to stay there, Sadie got used to commuting. To add value to her commuting, she deliberately combined commuting to Belfast with visiting a good sports option on the way, which she stated to be absent in her rural home area. In addition, she usually managed to do most of her groceries on the way from work, which was anyhow at a distance from where she lived. These diversions increased Sadie's tolerance of commuting, which supported her staying preference.

Finally, some respondents pointed to the value of having virtual relations with people living outside the area. Aaron (CV) and Imke (OG) both maintained online contacts, who made them feel part of a wider community. Imke combined a very limited mobile lifestyle with being highly active online. Imke had a distinctive appearance and hobby and needed to be part of a larger



network to find individuals like her. In this way, she was able to engage with diverse individuals, who are usually found in cities, which she perceived as being too 'busy'.

However, for some young adults, maintaining online contacts with friends elsewhere made it more difficult to stay. Iris (OG) expressed mixed feelings about keeping in touch online, which is in line with the finding of Cooke and Shuttleworth (2018), who stressed that information technologies could both enhance and limit residential mobility:

Although it does make it easier to maintain contacts outside Oost-Groningen, it also makes it harder because now you know how easy it is to maintain contacts with Oost-Groningen and leave. (Iris, OG)

Some young adults illustrated how 'place elasticity' and 'reverse place elasticity' are closely inter-related. The third sub-section of the Results revealed how 'place elasticity' can sustain a staying preference by transforming into 'reverse place elasticity' following an individual's return, which eventually supports the actualisation of staying. It is possible that among young adults, simply having the option to leave, without actually planning to leave, can create a sense of comfort regarding staying.

At the same time, the interviews also revealed how 'place elasticity' can lead young adults to question their staying preference. For instance, they can maintain relations maintained with friends in urban areas, which remind them of the option to leave. Eventually, 'reverse place elasticity' and 'place elasticity' seem to intersect, which is in accordan with Gustafson's (2001) finding on individuals' continuous attempts to find their own balance between staying and being mobile when diverse options exist.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we combined transitional and mobility perspectives on the staying preferences of rural young adults. In doing so, we aimed to contribute empirically to a better understanding of how rural young adults reflect on their past, present and future staying rural preferences and how these preferences relate to experiences and connections made elsewhere. Specifically, we aimed to unpack the fluid process of staying within two different spatial contexts. In another article emerging from the STAYin(g)Rural Project, we described geographical differences between these regions.

The application of a transitional perspective on staying has drawn attention to diverse periods in the evolvment of staying preferences. During the evolvment of staying preferences, young adults can experience alternating stable, developmental, unstable and ambiguous staying preferences. Consonant with the notion that staying preferences are continuously renegotiated within a 'state of flux' (Stockdale et al., 2018), our findings showed that staying rural preferences are in fact a result of messy processes unfolding through time with multiple alternations between deliberate and 'just-happened' periods. This finding highlights diverse temporal perceptions of self-agency (Sanchez-Mira & Bernardi, 2021), further illustrated by the fact that while making future residential plans, some rural young adults focused on the past, while others focused on the future.

By adopting a mobility perspective on staying, we build further on the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller & Urry, 2006). In line with this paradigm, which emphasises a personal and relative notion of (im)mobility (e.g., Gustafson, 2001), our findings indicate the need for

further studies aimed at interpreting staying processes in the context of relations with other places. The findings underline the relevance of past residential experiences and current non-residential mobility for analysing staying preferences, thus revealing that the dichotomy between staying and mobility is outdated. Whereas ‘place elasticity’ commonly enables individuals to live elsewhere, our findings also revealed that it can evoke awareness of a subconscious staying preference. Moreover, they showed that young adults can develop a staying preference as a result of experiencing ‘repel factors’ elsewhere as previously observed by Schewel (2020), which is consonant with the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ and supports the notion that rural places and spaces are mobile as well.

In addition, following Haartsen and Stockdale (2021), the findings provided further evidence of the presence of ‘reverse place elasticity’ as a factor enabling young adults to stay in their rural homes while maintaining connections elsewhere. It is possible that only just having the option of leaving maintained through these connections, without actually leaving, is sufficient to persuade young adults to stay. On the other hand, maintaining connections elsewhere can also keep a wish to leave alive. This finding confirms that the concept of ‘heterolocal identities’ (Halfacree, 2012), which originally referred to the consumption of the rural in a context of counter-urbanisation, also applies to rural young adults. In their consumption of the urban, they see both worlds as complementary (Rye, 2006). However, the findings also suggest that ‘reverse place elasticity’ can sustain a wish to leave.

We have additionally shown how transitional and mobility perspectives on staying are closely related. In addition to the concept of ‘spatial reflexivity’ (Cairns, 2017), the findings indicated the existence of ‘temporal-spatial reflexivity’. Initially, rural young adults, driven by societal expectations, move to an urban setting just to get along in life. This ‘just-happened’ move can enhance an individual’s awareness of repel factors in urban areas and foster a subconscious staying preference in the rural home area, indicating how developments relating to the shift from a ‘just-happened’ to a deliberate process (transitional) interact with experiences of having lived elsewhere (mobility). This transition is supported by the interchangeability of reverse place elasticity and place elasticity. In addition, similar to Mærsk (2021), our findings illustrate how mobility can serve as a form of capital (Kaufmann et al., 2004) when young adults attach symbolic meaning to their past residential experiences elsewhere (mobility) to justify their transition towards an appreciation of the comfort of staying rural as they grow older (transitional). Future research could provide more quantitative evidence of these transitions.

Using a biographical approach, we provided insight into the diversity of personal staying preferences. The application of this approach also yielded insight into the potential role of agency. The interview findings indicate that variations in agency during the evolution of staying preferences are relevant for understanding staying choices. For instance, a stable staying preference can be the result of making either a more active or a more passive choice. Of particular interest is the finding that some staying preferences may be the result of a risk aversion attitude. This finding is similar to that of Bernard (2022), namely, that the personal trait of openness is associated with internal migration. It should be noted, however, that rural young adults who decide to stay should not be considered unambitious or not adventurous. They can in fact be very active in their home areas, which does not always fit with a cosmopolitan view on being adventurous commonly applied in personal trait measures (e.g., the big five tests to capture five mental characteristics).

The danger of post hoc rationalisation associated with biographical reflections was an important consideration in this article. To limit its occurrence, we included questions about the level of deliberate choices in the interview guide. In doing so, we aimed to unpack whether reflections about staying preferences were based on deliberate or ‘just-happened’ processes. The issue of post

hoc rationalisation could be further addressed through more longitudinal studies that distinguish between contemporary and retrospective motivations for (im)mobility.

Our findings indicate that an opportunity exists for regional policies to be more effective when considering the right timing for promoting and supporting staying rural and returning to the rural. Policymakers should become more aware of the impacts of the timing of their policies through attempts to capture the moment when some young adults start to appreciate their attachment to their home area. We observed that many young adults were more able to appreciate the rural setting at an older age, which they already subconsciously appreciated during their childhood. Therefore, regional policies could target the development of rural appreciation at an earlier stage. In addition, young adults may develop a staying preference only after some time has passed following their return to their rural home areas. However, staying preferences can also be the outcome of subconscious behaviour and unexpected events, which limits policies aiming at supporting young adults to stay rural.

To conclude, we aimed to advance the understanding of staying preferences through the application of transitional and mobility perspectives. Whereas much of the migration literature has considered staying as a non-event, it is tempting to search for indications that staying is an event in its own right. We have illustrated how young adults select and interpret certain events to make sense of their past and current staying preferences. The danger is that these events may be explained as the decisive and constitutive moment of a staying preference. By contrast, we found that these selective events are, at least to some degree, post hoc rationalisations that tend to blur within a dynamic and somewhat messy 'journey' of staying in which young adults are inclined to stress tangible events that happened on the way during this journey. Essentially, staying rural can be conceptualised as a 'journey' entailing a complex, (unstable) evolving, spatially relational and (only partly) conscious process. Staying preferences are intermediate outcomes and can—and probably will—be further renegotiated.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## **ETHICS STATEMENT**

This article has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Respondents' socio-demographic characteristics.

Pseudonym	Age (years) <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Education	Partner
Arjen (OG)	21–26	M	Low	Yes
Imke (OG)	21–26	F	Low	No
Iris (OG)	21–26	F	Middle	Yes
Jeroen (OG)	27–31	M	Low	No
Kevin (OG)	21–26	M	Low	Yes
Lisa (OG)	27–31	F	High	Yes
Milan (OG)	21–26	M	Middle	No
Aaron (CV)	21–26	M	Middle	Yes
Daryl (CV)	27–31	M	Middle	Yes
Lydia (CV)	21 – 26	F	High	Yes
Sadie (CV)	27–31	F	High	No
Tom (CV)	27–31	M	Low	No

Abbreviations: CV, Clogher Valley; OG, Oost-Groningen.

<sup>a</sup>Exact age is not given to ensure anonymity of respondents.

TABLE A.2 Residential biographies of the respondents

Pseudonym	Place of birth	Residential history	Future staying preference	Current residential setting	Current household situation
Arjen (OG)	Village in study area	-Move to current address in early childhood, with parents	Staying preference in region/rural	Countryside	With parents
Imke (OG)	Small town in province Groningen	-Move to village in study area during adolescence, with mother -Move to town in province Groningen, alone	Staying preference in village	Village	Alone
Iris (OG)	Current address	- Always resided at current address	Short-term staying preference with parents	Village	With parents
Jeroen (OG)	Village in study area	-Move to Australia during early adulthood (3 years), alone	Doubtful staying preference	Village	Alone
Kevin (OG)	Current address	-Move to Canada for half-year internship during studies, alone	Staying preference in village/region	Village	With parents
Lisa (OG)	Countryside in study area	-Move to village in region, with mother during early adolescence -Moves to multiple cities in west part of the Netherlands during studies and first jobs, alone -Multiple countries worldwide during studies, alone	Staying preference of countryside in study area	Small town	Alone
Milan (OG)	Current address	-Move to South America for half-year internship during studies	Staying preference in village after temporal move to regional town	Village	With parents
Aaron (CV)	Current address	-Move to Belfast for studies, alone -Move to town in Ireland after studies, with partner	Staying preference in study area	Countryside	With parents
Daryl (CV)	Current address	-Move to Belfast for studies, alone -Moves to several cities in the UK and Ireland, alone	Staying preference in countryside in region	Countryside	With parents
Lydia (CV)	Current address	-Move to Belfast for studies, alone -Moves to work in Africa and southern European countries after studies	Staying preference in region	Village	With parents
Sadie (CV)	Town in region	-Move to Belfast for studies, alone	Staying preference in region after temporal move to regional town	Countryside	With parents
Tom (CV)	Town in region	-Moves to several cities in the UK for studies and jobs, alone -Move in early adulthood to town in region, with partner	Staying preference in village	Village	Alone

Abbreviations: CV, Clogher Valley; OG, Oost-Groningen.