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# How people move to rural areas: Insights in the residential search process from a diary approach



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## ABSTRACT

Given the ascribed importance of in-migration for the development of rural areas, it is remarkable that little attention is paid to *how* people end up in a specific rural place. This paper closely addresses the way in which the decision-making process of rural in-migrants takes place *during* their residential search. To do so, we experiment with the diary approach; a novel method in studying the residential search processes. Our findings indicate that the search process of home seekers in rural areas in the northern Netherlands is not always linear, and that based on their search process, different groups of searchers can be distinguished. The search areas of local, regional and distant searchers not only seem to differ in scale, but also in the extent to which they change over the course of the process. Whereas local movers began searching in their own or in neighbouring villages, and continued to do so throughout the search process, most regional and distant searchers started their search in one region but ended up somewhere completely different. Previous contact with an area, resulting in positive perceptions, appears to be essential for including an area in the search space. Our findings also suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the role of perceived social characteristics of rural areas in residential choice. Following searchers over time with a partly qualitative diary approach shows the non-linearity of the process, the role of representations, the more emotional aspects of residential decision-making and the influence of coincidence on the process.

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of the transition of the rural from a production to a consumption space, in-migration is often seen as an important opportunity for the development of rural areas (e.g. Andersen, 2011; Stockdale, 2006). In-migration provides economic benefits such as extra jobs in the rural economy (Stockdale et al., 2000; Findlay et al., 2000) as well as an increase of expenditures (Findlay et al., 2001). In-migrants may also contribute to the social fabric of rural areas. Stockdale and MacLeod (2013) show for instance for pre-retirement age migrants, a high incidence of participation, volunteering and the holding of responsible positions in local community groups. Newcomers are also known to play crucial roles in the regional development of rural areas by bringing in human capital, entrepreneurship, relevant social networks, and renewed impetus to the area overall in the forms of ideas and fresh enthusiasm (Stockdale, 2006; Derounian, 1998).

Against this background of the importance of in-migration for rural areas, it is remarkable to notice how little attention is given to the decision-making processes of rural in-migrants. This oversight was justly pointed out recently in this journal by Stockdale (2014). People do not move to 'the rural', they choose a specific property in a specific rural region. Nevertheless, ample studies on rural in-migration or counter-urbanisation mainly examine the characteristics and motivations of people moving into rural areas in general. In so doing, they tend to focus either on people considering a move, i.e. stated preferences (Van Dam et al., 2002) or on people who have already made a move into the rural, i.e. revealed preferences (Bijker and Haartsen, 2012; Bijker et al., 2012, 2013; Gkartzios and Scott, 2009; Grimsrud, 2011). But little attention is paid to *how* people end up in a specific rural place. We take the view that this facet can be explored by closely examining the way decision-making takes place *during* the residential search process. Also in the housing literature generally, the search process has remained under-researched, partly due to the predominance of quantitative research on housing mobility (McPeake, 1998; Posthumus and Kleinhans, 2014). As Clampton-Lundquist (2004) remarks: 'we tend

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to know quite a bit about outcomes and precious little about process' (p. 422).

The lack of attention for the decision-making processes of rural in-migrants is even more notable given the knowledge already available on the uneven distribution of rural in-migration. Some rural areas are considered as more attractive places in which to live than other areas (Bijker and Haartsen, 2012; Bijker et al., 2012); but also within less popular or depopulating rural areas one can observe so-called 'hotspots': characterised by rising house prices and in-migration of highly educated and high income households (Andersson, 2013; Magnusson Turner, 2013). Woods (2005) refers to this as 'the regionally uneven nature and uneven local geography of rural migration', which means that not all rural areas are able to benefit to the same extent from the opportunities that in-migration offers. More insight in the decision making processes of migrants in the rural context might help to better understand these differences between areas.

In addition to our knowledge on who migrates to the countryside and why, we think it is important to examine the 'how' of counter-urbanisation. Therefore, the first aim of this paper is to study the residential search process in rural areas. Greater insights into the process between stated intentions to move and actual moving behaviour in a rural context may provide policymakers in rural areas with opportunities to influence the number of in-migrants to their areas. That this is relevant is illustrated by the finding that non-local movers with a rural location preference more often move to a location other than that initially preferred, with urbanites facing a higher likelihood of moving eventually to an urban area (De Groot et al., 2012). The same study shows that, despite lower incomes, local movers are more likely to find homes within their preferred rural location than intended non-local movers. De Groot et al. (2012) note that it remains as yet unclear to what extent this can be explained by differences in the constraints people face in realising their preferences, in the strength of the rural location preference, or to factors such as emotional place attachment and local ties of intended local movers. Further investigation into the search process of these movers could increasingly uncover the role played by these factors.

The second aim of the paper is to explore the utility of a new method for studying the residential search process: a diary approach which applies both qualitative and quantitative elements. Until now, the search process has mainly been studied using retrospective survey methods, computer experiments, retrospective interviews, and simulation models (Donaldson, 1973; Hooijmeijer and Oskamp, 1996; Phipps, 1983; McPeake, 1998; Harper, 1991). There is only scant longitudinal research into the search process (Huff, 1986; Cronin, 1982; Goetgeluk, 1997). A diary approach however has several advantages as opposed to these existing methods. Firstly, it reduces the problem of the inaccuracy of memory, which is an issue that has been closely associated with the use of retrospective methods; Stockdale (2014) acknowledges this potential problem in her study using retrospective interviews (see also Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). A second issue arising from the use of retrospective methods is that often only people who did make a move to a (specific) rural area are included. Following people during their search process offers the opportunity to take note of changes that take place during the search process, whether their search leads them to new search areas, or if even if they quit their search. Furthermore, a diary approach in which people are repeatedly approached during their search has the potential to offer insights into what happens between the longer intervals of a longitudinal approach. Finally, by including qualitative elements in the approach, the opportunity arises to glean further insights into the often overlooked, more emotional, non-economic, less tangible aspects of human decision-making (Levy et al., 2008).

Our respondents were all searching for houses in rural areas in the northern Netherlands and were recruited through real estate agents in the area. Although in comparison with other European countries the Netherlands is a densely populated and urbanised area, a considerable part of the country is defined as rural by official bodies such as Statistics Netherlands and also according to the Dutch population (Haartsen et al., 2003a). In our definition of rural we follow Statistics Netherlands' national standard for the degree of urbanisation, the so-called address density, defined as an average of fewer than 1.000 addresses per square kilometre. We chose to locate our study in the northern Netherlands as it is the most rural part of the country according to both address density and the perceptions of the Dutch people (Haartsen et al., 2003a). Moreover, the North contains a wide variety of rural areas in terms of characteristics such as house price, landscape, accessibility, building style, and history (Bijker and Haartsen, 2012), which makes the region highly suitable for the study of search behaviour. As with other rural areas in Europe, population decline has begun in the Netherlands, specifically in peripheral parts of the country, including the northern Netherlands (Haartsen and Venhorst, 2010). Nevertheless, over 20.000 people from elsewhere in the Netherlands move to the North of the Netherlands each year and of these in-migrants 54% find a place to live in a rural area. In addition to migration flows from other parts of the country there is internal migration as well. On an annual basis approximately 30.000 people coming from one rural or urban municipality in the North, move to a rural municipality in the northern Netherlands (Bijker and Haartsen, 2012).

We start our paper with a discussion of the literature on residential search in general and within rural areas specifically. Thereafter we provide detail on the concept of representations. The diary approach is explained in the methodology section, followed by the results and conclusion.

## 2. Theory and previous research

### 2.1. The residential search process

The individual decision-making process with respect to residential mobility includes the formation of a positive attitude towards moving, the search for and evaluation of housing alternatives and ultimately the decision to move or to stay (De Groot et al., 2012). If intended movers are unable to realise their preferences, they may choose to stay in their current homes (Brown and Moore, 1970) or resort to substitution: the acceptance of a new home that may satisfy some but not all of their initial preferences (Goetgeluk, 1997). The realisation of intentions to move depends on the interaction between the triggers or motives for moving, housing preferences, individual resources and restrictions on the one hand, and the opportunities and constraints in the housing market on the other (De Groot et al., 2011a; Hooijmeijer and Oskamp, 1996). Often, the motive for moving develops from one of the careers that together form the life course: the residential, the household, education or employment career (Mulder, 1993). Anticipated changes in these careers can also affect the probability that the intention to move is realised because some triggers for moving are more urgent than others. While intended moves triggered by changes in the household, employment or educational careers are usually associated with a high degree of necessity, moves triggered by residential motives are often less urgent (Goetgeluk, 1997). On the other hand, unanticipated household and employment changes can lead to the postponement or cancellation of the intended move or result in an unexpected move within a short period (De Groot et al., 2011b; Speare, 1974).

The residential choice process occurs within the context of the housing market. By searching, the potential migrant interacts with

the market. The concept of search includes several interrelated characteristics: it is a goal-directed activity, it involves a complex process of information gathering; a point is reached where search ends and a choice is made; and it happens in a context of uncertainty and within a set of constraints (Clark and Flowerdew, 1982). The process of search may be characterised by its duration, the type of information sources used, the number of houses examined, and the radius of the area searched (Huff, 1982; Walmsley and Lewis, 1993).

Brown and Moore (1970) developed a model for residential search behaviour in which they include the influence of information on the spatial aspects of search. In this model, the potential migrant possesses a spatially selective image of the area. This is based on information acquired from regular, direct contact or indirect contact, such as through acquaintances' experiences and the mass media (Brown and Moore, 1970; Walmsley and Lewis, 1993). The term 'awareness space' is used to refer to those locations within the overall space about which the intended migrant household has knowledge before the search starts. Based on the preferences of the household, a 'search space' is defined within this awareness space. A preference for any particular place would not depend on the objective measures of that place, but on the filtered information which is the basis of the individual's cognitive environment (Voets, 1994). From the search space, the decision-maker constructs a choice set: a set of alternatives to be considered more carefully (Voets, 1994).

In addition to the household's existing knowledge of opportunities or locations, potential migrants use different information sources during the search process, including newspapers, walking or driving around, friends and relatives, and real estate agents (e.g. Barrett, 1976; Rossi, 1955; Walmsley and Lewis, 1993). Some research has specifically focused on how real estate agents influence the residential search process (see e.g. Palm, 1976; Perkins et al., 2008) and how they in certain cases even act as 'gatekeepers' using steering strategies to locate particular social groups in certain specific locations, also in a rural context (Smith, 2002). More recently, the internet has appeared as an information source in the search process. The limited evidence so far shows that newcomers to an area are more likely to use the internet, and searchers using the internet visit a larger number of houses personally, contrary to what was expected (Palm and Danis, 2002). The internet enables rural migrants to search across the whole country for houses based on a set of search criteria, rather than searching in particular regions (Niedomysl, 2010). The increasing role of the internet in the search process may decrease the possibilities for real estate agents to steer their customers to specific rural places. However, although the internet has influenced the search methods that are used, thus far it seems that overall it has had little impact on search patterns (Niedomysl, 2010; Palm and Danis, 2002).

Information plays an important role in the search process. After an inspection of a property, the household should have a sufficient impression of what Koopman (2012) calls observable attributes, such as the dwelling itself, accessibility, physical features and even the area's atmosphere. Nonetheless, what is difficult to determine is the social quality of an area, the "soft" socioeconomic and demographic attributes that shape the intangible, dynamic and largely unobservable social quality of the area' (Koopman, 2012, p. 35), which also includes the frequency and nature of social interactions among residents. This is something that is experienced rather than observed, which is why residents have an information advantage in this respect. House-seekers can adopt several spatial search strategies (see Huff, 1986) to reduce the amount of information that needs to be collected on distant neighbourhoods. Another strategy is relying on the neighbourhood's reputation

(Koopman, 2012), a concept which is discussed in the next section.

The search process is neither static nor linear, it changes over time and can be seen as a learning process. As the migrant gains experience of the area during his search, some areas may come to be included in the search space, while other areas may be eliminated (Brown and Moore, 1970; Walmsley and Lewis, 1993). According to Goetgeluk (1997), during their search process, people will also learn about the opportunities and constraints to achieving their housing preferences. Their preferences will therefore change and become more realistic in relation to the housing market.

## 2.2. The role of representations in the search process

As mentioned in the previous section, the delimitation of the search space within the awareness space and the choice set within the search space is based on 'the filtered information which is the basis of the individual's cognitive environment' (Voets, 1994, p. 12). It is assumed that people base their behaviour on their image, interpretation or representation of geographical space (e.g. Bunce, 1994; Haartsen et al., 2003b; Halfacree, 1994; Walmsley et al., 1998). For rural areas in general the 'rural idyll' is often seen as decisive for moving to the rural (Boyle and Halfacree, 1998, 1994; Van Dam et al., 2002). Representations exist in and are produced by communication and interaction (e.g. Holloway and Hubbard, 2001). Two forms of communication are important in this: mass communication and interpersonal communication (Haartsen, 2002). Direct experience with the object of representation is also important. People who are familiar with the countryside because they have lived there or visit it frequently have other and more positive representations of the rural (Haartsen, 2002; Van Dam et al., 2002). Our assumption is that also representations of specific rural places influence the residential search and decision process.

A concept related to representations, used in housing research in an urban context, is that of neighbourhood reputation. Neighbourhood reputation can be defined as 'the meaning and assessment assigned by residents and outsiders to the neighbourhood.' (Hortulanus, 1995, p. 42). This definition implies that a reputation is an image shared by a significant number of individuals; nevertheless, the same neighbourhood can have different reputations for different groups of people. Reputations differ for residents and non-residents, the internal reputation with residents is often more positive and more detailed. It appears that the rating of a neighbourhood is most strongly influenced by the socioeconomic and ethnic composition of the neighbourhood. Physical and functional characteristics appear to be less important (Permentier, 2009). As discussed in the previous section, relying on a neighbourhood's reputation during the search process can be a risk-minimising strategy when information about the social quality of an area is lacking (Koopman, 2012).

## 2.3. The search process in rural areas

Few studies have investigated the residential search process in a rural context. Lewis and Sherwood (1994, as cited in Lewis, 1998) found in England that households with locational ties to a district had usually made their choice of district well before the decision to migrate was activated. Those households without a connection to their ultimate chosen district tended to consider several possibilities, using a variety of information sources, though the final choice was mostly based on personal experience. For both groups, however, the choice of village or small town involved a tendency to focus the search on part of a district, and the availability of a particular type of house was the most significant criterion. This seems to be contrary to Harper's finding (1991) that settlement

selection is increasingly replacing property-based selection. She signals that instead of being based on personal and prior association, the decisions of the movers were often based on abstract preconceptions of the area (cf. [Walmsley et al., 1998](#)). [Niedomysl \(2010\)](#) also found that in Sweden only few migrants considered more than two regions to move to, but most considered a number of alternative locations within an area. More recently, [Stockdale \(2014\)](#) shows for early retirees migrating to mid-Wales that financial considerations and the affordability of the mid-Wales property market strongly influenced their choice of destination, which often was not their first preference. The choice of specific location or property was often perceived as 'accidental' by respondents, for instance coming across the house they would eventually purchase entirely by chance while visiting other properties.

### 3. Methodology

We used a diary approach to study the residential search process. This is a new method to study the residential search process, but has been used previously in other scientific fields and topics, such as time use, health behaviour and marital and family processes (e.g. [Richardson, 1994](#); [Laurenceau and Bolger, 2005](#); [Larson, 1989](#); [Sudman and Ferber, 1971](#); [Rieman, 1993](#)). [Richardson \(1994\)](#) identifies the ability to obtain data about processes as an advantage of the diary approach, capturing the time sequence of events and perceptions as they unfold, rather than relying on recall of past events. Traditional longitudinal designs can also address these questions, but because they typically involve only a small number of repeated measurements taken at long intervals, they cannot capture changes in the same detailed way ([Bolger et al., 2003](#)). The advantages of a diary approach fit with the idea that the search for a new house is a learning process, in which the search space, representations of areas and preferences are likely to change over time.

#### 3.1. Recruitment strategy

We recruited our respondents through real estate agents in the northern Netherlands in the spring of 2009. The main eligibility criterion was that they were looking for a house in rural areas in the northern Netherlands. Rural was defined very broadly, including both villages and surrounding areas. It was quite difficult to find respondents because of the stagnation in the housing market at the time. We contacted a number of real estate agents and made an appointment to visit them or explained the study in the telephone conversation. In the talks with the real estate agents the housing market situation was an important theme. Some of them did not want to cooperate with us because the stagnation on the market had led to less transactions, which made the real estate agents more cautious to 'bother' their clients with asking them for the study. Some agreed to assist us, but simply had very few searchers contacting them due to the situation on the housing market. In addition, the popularity of housing websites in the Netherlands, amongst which 'Funda' on which a large share of the real estate agents in the Netherlands is able to advertise their vacancies, has led to a decrease in the number of people who search for a house through a real estate agent. Often a real estate agent is only contacted when people have seen a house on the internet and want to visit it or even only for assistance in the process of buying a specific property.

We followed several strategies to approach respondents through the real estate agents who were willing to cooperate. We asked agents to include a message about the study to prospective house buyers to whom information about new houses on the market was regularly sent. If an agent had no such mailing list, we

asked them to inform people who visited a house with them about our research via a letter. We also received contact details from people who had visited a house with the real estate agent, which permitted us to ask them directly whether they wanted to participate. Ultimately this resulted in a group of ten respondents who were followed in their residential search process.

#### 3.2. Diary approach

The data collection started with a semi-structured in-depth interview with each respondent, because they were recruited at different stages of their search process. The interview provided information about the search process to that point and also offered an opportunity for meeting the respondents in person. Personal interaction between researcher and respondents is regarded as important for the successful application of a diary approach, because it creates commitment to the research project which helps to motivate the respondents to keep on filling in the diaries ([Richardson, 1994](#); [Rieman, 1993](#)). In addition, the questions considered some background characteristics, the residential history of the household and the extent of contact with rural areas in the North prior to starting the search. Furthermore, respondents were asked about their motives for moving and their residential preferences. We used a map with regions in the northern Netherlands to further discuss the search area and the associations that came up when thinking about the search area and the surrounding areas. Some of the respondents shared their search process with the interviewer by providing some examples of their favourite houses. One of the respondents produced a roadmap of the Netherlands on which he had marked his search areas. Most of the interviews were conducted at the respondents' homes, but for practical reasons, in three cases the respondent's workplace was used for the interview. Dependent on the respondent's preferences, some of interviews were done with both of the partners, some with only one. The interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h. The interviews were recorded and literally transcribed. For the analysis we used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA.

A diary approach can use a time-based or an event-based design. Whereas a time-based design requires participants to report on their experiences at regular intervals or in response to a signal given by a signalling device, event-contingent studies require participants to provide a self-report each time the event in question occurs. When using an event-based design, it is important that events are easy to identify for respondents ([Bolger et al., 2003](#)). The residential search process consists of easy and less easy to define events. For instance, an easy to define event is visiting a house. A less easy to define event could be to have an unplanned chat with someone about another region than the search area which might trigger you to explore the vacancies in this new region. Therefore, we chose a time-based design to study the residential search process.

Consequently, every two weeks after the interview until they bought a house or quit searching, the respondents were invited by e-mail to complete an electronic questionnaire by clicking on a link. When using a fixed time schedule for a diary approach, the length of intervals is important ([Bolger et al., 2003](#)). It seems that the search process can change pace and intensity. Therefore, the interval should not be too long: in an intensive period things could be missed or forgotten. To avoid a research design that is too demanding for the respondents, the interval should not be too short either. Inviting the respondents by e-mail every two weeks reminds them to complete the questionnaire, just like a signalling device ([Bolger et al., 2003](#)). A diary which is short and easy to complete helps to keep people motivated to participate ([Richardson, 1994](#); [Stone et al., 1991](#)). The electronic questionnaire

with open and closed questions was easy to complete and only showed questions relevant to the respondent, based on their answers to previous questions. The questionnaire focused on tracking changes in the search process; as soon as search activities or changes in the process occurred, additional questions asking for more detail became visible. This design led to a short questionnaire when little had happened, while more questions appeared when changes had taken place. Respondents were asked whether they had bought a house or had quit searching each time. Furthermore, questions were included about housing preferences and preferences about the residential environment. Respondents could see what they had filled in the last time and could make changes if their preferences changed. If they did, they were asked why. The same applied to the search area. Furthermore, they were asked which search activities they had undertaken, with additional information being asked for some activities.

The risk of using a diary approach is that completing the diary could influence the process studied, for example by generating new thoughts about the search process. People could also feel 'lazy' if the diary arrived in their mailbox and they had not developed any search activities, causing them to feel obliged to try some new search activity for the sake of it. Therefore, during the explanation of the method it was emphasised that 'nothing happened' in the search process over two weeks was an acceptable response. So far, there is little evidence of behaviour change as a result of participating in a diary approach (Bolger et al., 2003; Litt et al., 1998). 'Habituation' could lessen the risk of influencing the process: people get used to the rhythm of receiving and completing the questionnaire, thus attending to it less self-consciously (Bolger et al., 2003). On the other hand, habituation, and more specifically the development of a habitual response style when completing the diary, could have negative effects, for instance by causing the development of a tendency to skim over questions (Bolger et al., 2003).

### 3.3. Study population

The intensive research method provided rich in-depth, detailed information about the residential search process in rural areas of different types of searchers. Therefore we think that the relatively small size of the sample is suitable to make a first exploration of the under-researched decision-making process of rural in-migrants and also to explore the utility of the diary approach as a novel method to study the residential search process (compare also Stockdale, 2014).

During the analysis it emerged that three groups of searchers could be identified, based on the distance between their place of residence and search area, and the scale of their search area and other distinct aspects of their search process, which are discussed further in the results section. Four of the respondents were living outside the northern Netherlands at the time of recruitment: this group will be termed distant searchers in the remainder of this paper. Three respondents were already living in the northern Netherlands and were initially searching within a wider area in the northern Netherlands (regional searchers). Three of the

respondents were also already living in the North and were initially searching very locally, in the village they were living in or in a neighbouring village (local searchers). Table 1 presents the characteristics of the three groups of respondents.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Overview of search process

The results section starts with an overview of the search processes of the respondents, based on the interviews and diary data. After that we focus on some specific aspects of the search process.

Table 2 shows that the search duration varied greatly, from 8 months to 8 years (while still searching). However, there did not seem to be clear differences in this respect between the three groups of searchers. The reason for moving for all local searchers relates purely to housing characteristics. For the regional and distant searchers this seems to be more varied: housing-related reasons, wanting to leave the current residential environment, the desire to make a new start, marriage, and the wish to live closer to a specific school type. This difference corresponds with the distinction between short-distance and long-distance moves which is often made in the residential mobility literature, in which short-distance moves are mainly associated with housing-related motives (see also Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999). Most of the moves were not of a very urgent nature. For some of the respondents, the urgency was diminished by the fact that they first wanted to sell their existing houses. Two of the distant searchers clearly indicated that because their move was not a necessity, the new house should offer a real improvement: one of them even spoke of a 'dream house'.

Half the movers changed their housing preferences or residential environment preferences during their searches, in accordance with the idea that searching can be regarded as a learning process about the possibilities in the housing market (Goetgeluk, 1997). Most changes were recorded in the diary questionnaire, indicating that they were made later in the search process. In addition to changing preferences, Table 2 shows that changes in the household situation can also affect the search process. L1 decided to quit searching due to her pregnancy and unemployment of her partner, while financial problems caused R5 initially to switch from a preference for buying to renting. With respect to the search areas and their development, a clear difference can be seen between local searchers on the one hand and regional and distant searchers on the other. Fig. 1 shows the places and areas mentioned in relation to the search areas in Table 2 and the main text.

### 4.2. Search area

Clearly visible in Table 2 is the differing scale of the search areas of local, regional and distant searchers. While local movers spoke of the villages they were searching in, regional and distant movers initially spoke about areas, mostly consisting of several municipalities. The three types of movers also differ in the extent to which they changed their search areas during the process. The local

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of the respondents.

	Local searchers	Regional searchers	Distant searchers
Age (min.–max.)	25–30	27–55	51–63
Household composition	Couples (one with children living at home)	Couples (one with children living at home)	Couples without children living at home
Level of education (min.–max.)	Secondary-higher	Secondary-higher	Secondary-higher
Max. house price (min.–max.)	130,000–280,000	155,000–450,000	200,000–350,000

**Table 2**  
Overview of search process of respondents (L = local searcher, R = regional searcher and D = distant searcher).

Resp. nr.	Search duration (months)	Reason for moving	Urgency of the move	Initial search area	Development of search area	End of search	Changes in preferences
<b>L1</b>	24	Move from owning to renting	Desire to move in one year (at time of interview, after one year searching)	Their current village (Hallum) and neighbouring villages	No changes	Bought a house in Hallum	Size of garden could be less with a semi-detached house; building period important (after 1990); preference for newly built, but municipality has no plans
<b>L2</b>	8	Desire for larger house and a quiet street	No time limit for the search to end	The larger neighbouring village (Stiens)	No changes	Bought a house in Stiens	No
<b>L3</b>	24	Move from renting to owning and a larger space outside	No time limit	Their current village (Hallum)	No changes	Quit searching due to pregnancy and unemployment of partner	No
<b>R4</b>	36 (still searching)	House had become too large, to make a new start	No time limit, important to sell the current house for a good price	Northern Drenthe, Westerkwartier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Added northwestern Groningen (around the current place of residence)</li> <li>• Developed a preference for three villages: Zuidlaren, Roden and Leek</li> </ul>	Still searching, not expecting to move in short term; not sold their own house	No
<b>R5</b>	48	Marriage	They want to live together; urgency is quite high	The southeast of Drenthe, 15 km around Hoogeveen, Oldambt, Zeeland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oldambt and Zeeland disappeared</li> <li>• Focus on area around Hoogeveen</li> <li>• Added Hoogeveen itself</li> </ul>	Bought a house in Hoogeveen	Switched from preference for buying to renting to buying again; preference for a rural setting, switched to urban area
<b>R6</b>	15	To live closer to a specific school type	Waiting for more clarity about the schools, waiting for own house to be sold	Assen and surroundings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Added Emmen and surroundings</li> <li>• Focus on '10 km around Delfzijl'</li> </ul>	Quit searching because they have not sold their own house	No
<b>D7</b>	14	Job change, desire to make a new start	Desire to move within a year (at time of the interview, after eight months of searching), new house should be real improvement	Veenkoloniën and Westerwolde	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For a while also around Emmen, because of the possibility of a job there</li> </ul>	Bought a house in Nieuwe Pekela	Building period of house less important, preference for older house remains; availability of public transport less important
<b>D8</b>	29	Desire for larger house and a garden, desire to leave the current place of residence in the Randstad area (lack of open space/asocial behaviour)	No time limit, searching for a 'dream house'	The North and Southwest of Drenthe, also a small area in the 'Green Heart' in the Randstad area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Added northern and north-eastern Groningen</li> <li>• Added northern Friesland and an area in southeastern Friesland</li> <li>• Focus on northern Friesland and northwestern Groningen</li> <li>• Added another area in southeastern Friesland, removed it again</li> <li>• Focus on three villages in northwestern Groningen and northern Friesland</li> <li>• Focus on northwestern Groningen and two villages in particular</li> </ul>	Bought a house in Pieterburen	Preference for a woody landscape, due to high house prices there they made a change to search areas with an open landscape type; design of the house and building period more important ('characteristic' house); lower maximum price; proximity of larger place and presence of facilities in the village less important; size of the village matters more
<b>D9</b>	96 (still searching)	Increasing inconvenience caused by people living in the neighbourhood (noise, rubbish)	Every year they say to each other: 'this year it is really going to happen'	In Zeeland (near their current place of residence) on the island of Walcheren	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Westerwolde</li> <li>• Added northeast Groningen</li> <li>• Added northern Groningen</li> <li>• Focus on the municipality 'De Marne'</li> </ul>	Still searching, planning to move this year	No

<b>D10</b>	18	Having to leave their official residence due to retirement of partner	Move within 18 months at time of interview (6 months after beginning the search)	Veluwe, their current village in the Randstad area, Alblasserwaard, Betuwe, Achterhoek, Amerongen, northern Netherlands with a focus on northern Groningen and southeastern Friesland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Search area is widened again to Groningen and Friesland</li> <li>• Focus on the northern provinces</li> <li>• Groningen disappeared</li> <li>• Betuwe added again</li> <li>• Widened to the Netherlands (except Groningen)</li> <li>• Focus on southern Friesland, Drenthe and Overijssel</li> <li>• Focus on the Alblasserwaard</li> <li>• Steenwijk and surroundings</li> <li>• Alblasserwaard and Veluwe</li> <li>• Veluwe, Betuwe and around Steenwijk</li> <li>• Alblasserwaard</li> <li>• Overijssel, Gelderland, Alblasserwaard, close to current house, Veenwouden</li> <li>• South of Zwolle, an area in North-Brabant and around Nunspeet (Veluwe)</li> </ul>	Bought a house in Nunspeet	Preference for an older house, newly-built now also an option; maximum price increased; proximity of a suitable parish more important than initially thought; proximity of job opportunities more important; proximity of family and friends more important; important to feel it 'click' with the house, yet the house bought did not provide that feeling (from the '70s, not an initial preference)
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movers started searching in their own or a neighbouring village and continued to do that throughout the search process. For the regional and distant searchers, the process was much less linear. However, the degree of change varied. In some cases the search area moved to another area, in other cases the search area was expanded or areas disappeared from the search range. Nonetheless, some of the regional and distant searchers developed a preference for a municipality or even specific villages during their search process. In two cases the ultimate house was also found in these preferred villages. Respondents mentioned these kinds of changes during their initial interviews, but the diary questionnaire helped track the changes later in the search process.

It appears that for local searchers the importance of local ties is an important reason for their distinct search pattern. In the interviews the local searchers mentioned several types of local ties. Firstly, these ties were related to work or the proximity of family and friends, and more in general the depth of their roots in a social network. L2 described the effects of moving to another area as follows:

Then you'll miss your connection with everything you've got here, then you'll have to make a completely new start.

Another aspect was the continuation of daily activities, for example not wanting to change children's primary schools. Finally, some degree of emotional attachment to a place played a role. The regional searchers also mentioned local ties that bound them in their search. In contrast to the local searchers, these were not restricted to a specific village, as for them it was sufficient to live at 'a reasonable distance'.

Whereas local ties are by definition very area-specific, most of the regional and distant searchers were motivated by preferences not confined to one specific rural municipality. Some of the distant and regional searchers were attracted by a specific housing type in a rural setting, others also mentioned the general benefits of rural living and the desire for an attractive landscape. Their less strong preference for a specific rural location made it easier for them to change search area. However, as remarked above, the specificity of the search area increased during the search process of most regional and distant movers. It appears that more area-specific preferences are developed during the search process.

#### 4.3. The role of representations

As discussed in Section 2, searchers start with an awareness space based on direct and indirect contact, and from within this awareness space a search area is selected (Brown and Moore, 1970). Most of the searchers mentioned in the interview that they had already had direct experience of their search area. The local searchers searched within their current residential environment. The regional searchers mention previous residential experiences or recreational activities. Distant searchers also had previous direct or indirect contact with most of their search areas. Some of the distant searchers started their search close to their current residence and knew these areas by living in their proximity. One couple (D10) partly searched in areas she and her husband had lived in before. Her husband was the only distant searcher who had previously lived in the northern Netherlands. Respondent D8 became acquainted with his later search area in northern Groningen through trips in the surroundings with his girlfriend who lived in the city of Groningen.

Sometimes it was more a case of indirect contact with the North in general, for example through having had a nice visit to the city of Groningen (without visiting the rural surroundings). D7 described a clear example of how direct contact with an area can change a

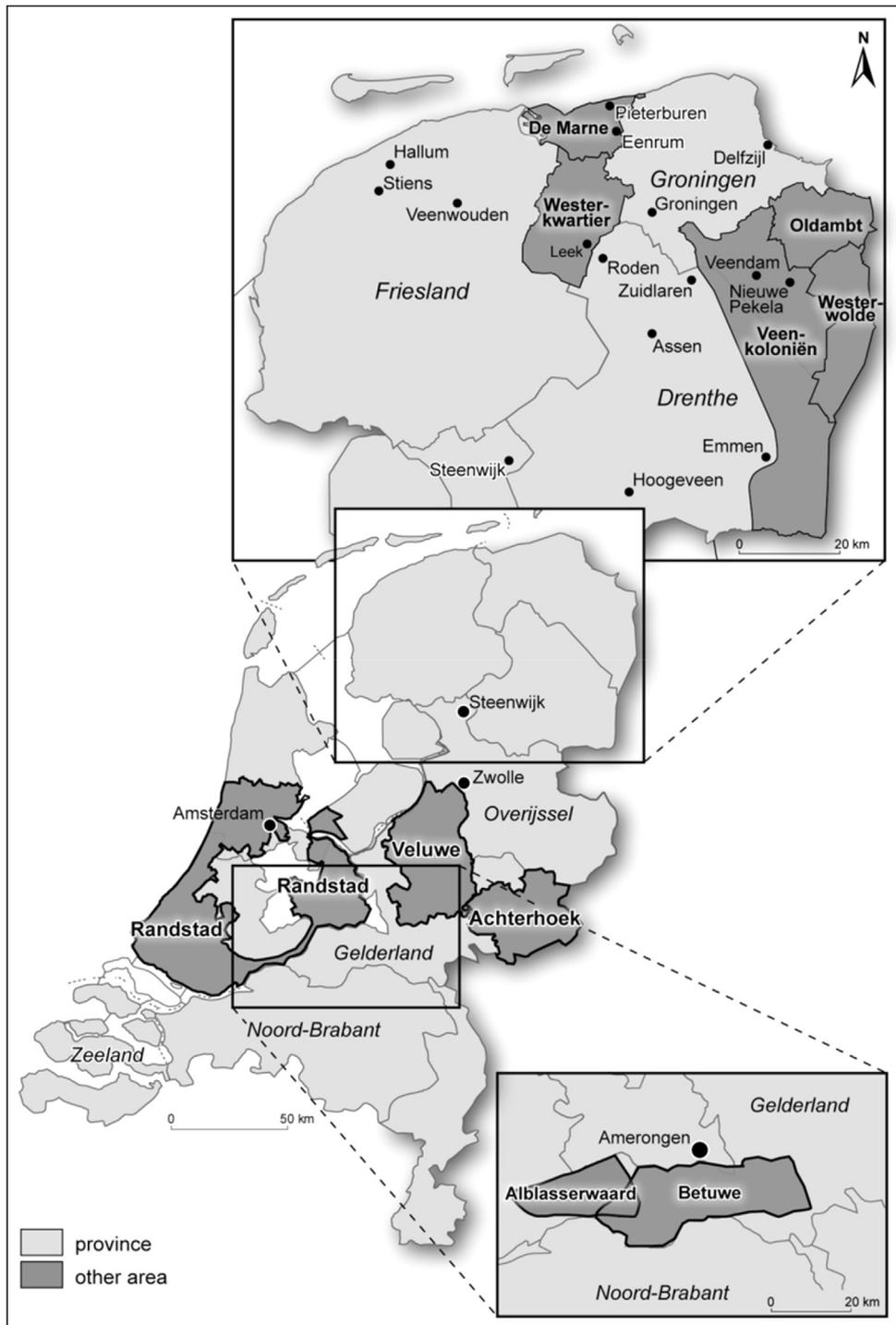


Fig. 1. Areas and places mentioned in the description of the search areas of the respondents.

negative view on the region in a positive way. She did not know the town of Veendam and its surroundings, while her husband knew the area through his work and proposed looking for a house there because of a job opportunity.

Gosh, all the way up north, I couldn't bear thinking about it. Veendam didn't sound nice at all. (...) We went to Veendam and I liked the place very much. And beautiful houses, I said 'I could really live here'.

The differentiation between the awareness space and the search space implies that knowledge of an area does not

necessarily lead to a positive appreciation of the area. It means that based on certain perceived characteristics, some areas are excluded from the search process before it actually starts. From the interviews we know that this indeed appeared to be the case. Both local and regional searchers mentioned areas they did not want to live in, as illustrated by this quote from R5:

I worked as a trainee near Erica. Well, I do not exactly like the people there. The way they speak is completely different. They are blunt. I was young then, but my first reaction when I got

home was: 'I don't want to have anything to do with them, I wouldn't dream of living there'.

Some of the searchers also mentioned specific villages they wanted to avoid. Two local searchers even mentioned streets or neighbourhoods to avoid within the village. L1 explains how she distinguishes between different villages surrounding her current village:

Those villages around Hallum, you'd want to live in some of them, but in some of them you wouldn't want to live at all. Take Blija for example, that really is a boorish village. The youths go to a 'keet' (rural youth hangout, cf. [Haartsen and Strijker, 2010](#)), and that then is their goal in life. Well, my goals are different.

However, there is a considerable difference in spatial scale when it comes to excluding certain areas from the search process based on perceived characteristics. Distant movers refer to whole provinces instead of smaller areas or villages. This difference is comparable with the finding that the reputation of a neighbourhood is more detailed for residents than for non-residents ([Permentier, 2009](#)). D8 remarks:

Brabant, I wouldn't want to live there. Look, of course parts of Brabant are very beautiful. (...) But I have had some very unpleasant experiences with people from Brabant. I always say that people from Brabant are sneaky, they act nicely to your face, but behind your back they say something entirely different. (...) Somebody from the North will make it clear that he likes you or not. You may call it stubborn, but at least it is honest.

Representations of areas not only play a role in determining the initial search area, they can also change or become more refined during the search process. The representations of areas that local and regional searchers had did not change very much, probably because they did not really explore areas that were new to them. The distant searchers did explore areas that were relatively unknown to them. Sometimes their impression of the region changed negatively, resulting in omitting that area from further searches. Search activities can also lead to a more differentiated representation of a province, when searchers discover specific parts within the wider area which inspire them to narrow their search area. D8 recounted the poor impression the east of the province of Groningen made on him:

Well, this is also a region, it's really a very beautiful area, you know, Bourtange, all those places. (...) Only you see straight-away that the people are not well off, oh yes, you can really see that (...) Yes, the houses, they simply look a bit shabby.

On the other hand, the northern part of the province made a very creative impression on him, which better fitted his and his partner's lifestyle and job:

And that's something we really pay attention to, for example in Eenrum. There you see people who own small galleries. And that gave us the idea, oh, creative people must live here. (...)

From the answers this distant searcher recorded in his diary questionnaire, it became clear how his perceptions of villages, which he obtained when visiting available properties, influenced the development of a preference for specific villages within his search area. After visiting a house in Oude Bildtziyl he noted 'nice surroundings, nice village, beautiful landscape', while a visit to a house in Sijbrandahuis (both villages are in northern Friesland) led

him to remark 'boring landscape, no facilities nearby, somehow I like the people in Dokkum and surroundings less than the people in Oude Bildtziyl and surroundings'. Oude Bildtziyl became one of his preferred villages. However, a few weeks later he wrote 'we have visited the North again a couple of times and we think that the area around Eenrum and Pieterburen is simply great'. Quite soon after this he bought a house in Pieterburen (in northern Groningen).

The searchers themselves acknowledge that some degree of coincidence is involved in developing either a positive or a negative perception of an area. This is illustrated by the following quote from D8:

We went to Wierum; we got there sometime around dinner-time. Wierum really is a lovely, picturesque village and we ended up in a pub and the landlord fried some fresh fish for us and that was really very cosy, that definitely has some influence on your judgment.

Notably, when referring to perceived characteristics based on which places are excluded from the search process beforehand or during the search process, the respondents often referred to social characteristics. This fits the urban concept of neighbourhood reputation, in which social characteristics play an important role ([Permentier, 2009](#)). However, in a rural context the focus is most often on the importance of landscape amenities to determine residential choice, while these social characteristics receive little attention (e.g. [Argent et al., 2007](#)).

#### 4.4. Search activities

It is clear from the interviews that the internet, and in particular the Dutch housing website 'Funda', has developed into a central information source for local, regional and distant searchers. A large share of the real estate agents in the Netherlands is able to advertise their vacancies on this website. Most searchers also employed other search methods next to the internet. Several searchers received notifications from a real estate agent on suitable vacancies. Driving around looking for properties is another strategy, also done by the distant searchers. While driving around, they also looked for other houses for sale, which they did not select at the housing website. It also helped to define places that 'feel good' (D8):

Well, then we started making trips all around the Netherlands. At a certain moment we started putting circles on the map around places that felt good. Or if I happened to be in a certain area and I thought: hey, this feels nice, you know, then you put a circle around it.

This idea of 'it felt good' is mentioned by other searchers as well, referring to areas and houses. Inspections appear to be valuable for both investigating objective characteristics more deeply, such as the quality of the house and the facilities in the village, and less tangible characteristics, as expressed in the following quote (D8):

Because we feel we really have to fall in love with a house (...). So perhaps it is more a matter of the heart than the head.

For non-residents it is possible to gain insight into observable characteristics of an area and less tangible aspects such as atmosphere, but the social quality of an area is more difficult to discover ([Koopman, 2012](#)). Relying on neighbourhood reputation is a way of dealing with the uncertainty about the social qualities of an area ([Koopman, 2012](#)). It appears that some of the distant searchers use the reputations of whole provinces to narrow down their search

space, as discussed in the previous section. However, when it comes to really deciding where to live within an already more limited search area, these distant searchers do not rely on this 'risk-minimising strategy', because social characteristics are too important to their choices. The regional and distant searchers mentioned different strategies for gaining greater insight into the social qualities of an area. D8 attached great importance to driving around, talking to people and looking for signs of the presence of artistic or creative people. R6 mentioned asking people who live in the area about their perceptions of regions or villages, he also used internet to explore what kind of activities go on in a village, at schools, etc. Another example is offered by D9:

By just walking around, talking to people. Asking them what it is like to live there (...). Also, talk to the neighbours when you visit a house. Ask them how they feel about living there and if there are any problems. It isn't watertight, but you try to minimize the risks this way.

#### 4.5. Resources, restrictions and opportunities in the housing market

While representations can limit the search process in some ways, there can also be more concrete factors. Obviously, the interaction between the financial resources of a searcher and the houses available in the housing market determines to a large extent whether and where a move is made. Resources and opportunities were discussed in almost all interviews. For the local and most of the regional searchers, house prices influenced choosing specific houses, but did not determine the search area. House prices did influence the search area choice of three of the distant searchers. In the west and central parts of the Netherlands, house prices are generally higher than in the more peripheral areas (De Groot et al., 2011a). Within the northern Netherlands the most northern and eastern municipalities have the lowest house prices in the country (Bijker et al., 2012). The distant searchers explained during the interviews that, while searching, they discovered that their preferred housing types were practically unaffordable for them in the central part of the country, which forced them to search elsewhere. The relatively lower house prices in the northern and eastern parts of the northern Netherlands played a considerable role in their choice to search there. This corresponds to the findings of Stockdale (2014) in mid-Wales, where affordability also was an important consideration for immigrants to the area.

In addition to financial resources, some other types of restriction came to the fore in the interviews. First, most distant searchers mentioned social ties or work-related ties to the current residential environment. As this quote of D10 illustrates:

... on the one hand there is living in the country, our desire, a nice old house, but on the other hand there is the large distance from our family and friends. (...) Are we going to do voluntary work or will we still be able to have the opportunity to do something in our own line of work? So we really feel that we have to let many things go that are dear to us and made us very happy.

These ties resemble the local ties of the local searchers, discussed in Section 4.2. However, for the local searchers these ties were so strong that they prevented them from moving to another place altogether, while for the distant searchers these ties were more a constraining factor with a possible influence on their search space. A factor mentioned by several regional and distant searchers restricting making a move at all, is the possibility of

selling the current house at an acceptable price, which was no longer a self-evident truth in the Dutch housing market at that time.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

Our investigation into how people search for a new residence in rural areas and how they end up in a particular rural place, verifies that the search process is not always linear. Small and seemingly trivial events may influence the process or change the search area. Despite of the relatively small group of respondents, our research indicates that different types of searchers can be distinguished. The search areas of local, regional and distant searchers not only seem to differ in scale, but also in the extent to which they change during the search process. Whereas the local movers in our study began searching in their own or in neighbouring villages and continued to do so throughout the search process, the regional and distant searchers often started their search in one region but ended up somewhere different. This confirms the suggested explanation of De Groot et al. (2012) in relation to their finding that intended non-local movers are less likely to realise their rural location preferences than intended local movers. Although their longitudinal approach was not able to uncover this, our findings show that the rural location preference of non-local searchers is indeed less pronounced and therefore makes them more willing to change their search area. In addition, the importance to local searchers of local ties explains why they persevere with their initial search area. Our results suggest that it is not a better knowledge of the local housing market enjoyed by local movers which makes it easier for them to realise their preferred move. All searchers use the Internet to obtain information about available properties and thus have comparable levels of knowledge in this respect. However, what is different is their knowledge of the social qualities of an area. Local and regional searchers are able to distinguish between different villages and even streets. Distant searchers have adopted several strategies to overcome this disadvantage, ranging from driving around, to meeting the neighbours when visiting a house. The importance attached to detecting these social qualities, as well as the importance of certain feelings about areas and houses, means that the Internet has not replaced 'older' search methods such as driving around areas and visiting houses. However, it appears that Internet sites such as Funda in the case of the Netherlands do make it easier for distant searchers to explore new potential search areas, sometimes also resulting in changes in their search spaces.

Representations of areas also play an important role in the search process and in different ways. Firstly, direct or indirect contact with an area appears to be essential in order to include the area in the search space. However, knowledge of an area does not necessarily lead to a positive appreciation of it; both local and regional searchers mentioned areas within the province or specific villages where they chose not want to live, and distant movers referred to the omission of whole provinces based on perceived characteristics. It is noteworthy that, when referring to perceived characteristics based on which places were excluded from the search process, respondents often mentioned social characteristics. In a rural context the focus in research is often on the significance of landscape and locational amenities in determining residential choice (e.g. Argent et al., 2007). Our findings suggest that more attention is required for the role of perceived social characteristics of rural areas in residential choice, as is already the case in an urban context (Permentier, 2009).

From the results of our research we can derive some suggestions for facilitating the search process of people that already are

potentially interested in moving to rural areas. Firstly, the finding that contact with an area seems to be essential for including that area in the search space suggests that encouraging tourism can be an indirect way of attracting future inhabitants. Experiments such as handing out free train tickets or 'try living here' events could also be worthwhile. Secondly, although it is difficult to influence regional images positively by policy measures, it is nevertheless important not to influence them negatively. The discussion on population decline in the Netherlands for example, leads to images in the media of houses with boarded-up windows and empty shops. In some cases local policymakers seem to reinforce such images in order to strengthen their case for receiving grants from the national government. However, we suggest that this might not be a good strategy for attracting new inhabitants. It is important to acknowledge that, as in urban areas, the reputation of an area plays a role in residential choice, and that such reputations are persistent (see also Bijker, 2013). Finally, from the non-linear and sometimes whimsical character of the search process it can also be concluded that large-scale housing projects, often developed aiming at attracting large groups of urban residents to the rural, do not seem to connect with the way newcomers search for houses in the rural and may therefore not be a realistic and effective way to decrease population decline in rural areas.

Using a diary approach has provided more insight into the residential search process by revealing the changes in the search space as well as preferences that are made between the beginning and the end of the search. Following searchers over time shows the non-linearity of the process and the role of representations; these aspects are incorporated into residential choice models such as that of Brown and Moore (1970) but remain invisible when using longitudinal methods with longer intervals. The qualitative elements elucidate the more emotional, less tangible aspects of residential decision-making (see also Levy et al., 2008) and the influence of coincidence on the process. These aspects are also generally overlooked when using quantitative longitudinal data. A combination of in-depth interview and periodic questionnaire have turned out to be very useful. We have the impression that personal contact and the fact that the researcher made the effort to visit respondents has led to high compliance with respect to completing the questionnaire. The interview provided rich information, which also helped in the interpretation of questionnaire answers. Due to its more quantitative nature, however, the questionnaire provided mostly information on the development of the search process, but the final decision involving trade-offs between preferences, is harder to disentangle from it. One way to fill in this gap would be to add a 'final interview' to the approach. With regard to the diary approach technology, it might be worthwhile to explore the possibilities associated with the increased use of smartphones, which permit people to record their experiences during the search process in real time.

In the extensive literature on rural in-migration the residential search process has until now remained rather neglected. We have made a first attempt to shed more light on the 'how' of counter-urbanisation by using a novel method in this field, which has provided more insight in the residential search process in rural areas and the factors influencing it. It would be interesting to see if the same search patterns and influences are at work among rural in-migrants in other regions or countries and in other time periods. The latter in particular would be interesting, as our study took place in a period in which the crisis on the housing market resulted in price drops and decreasing numbers of transactions in most parts of the Netherlands. Recruiting potential respondents through housing websites instead of through real estate agents could possibly make it easier to assemble a larger group of searchers to study.

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