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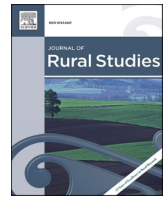
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# Being a part of and apart from. Return migrants' ambivalent attachment to rural place

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## ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the return migration of highly educated young people to rural places. It seeks to understand the drivers and concerns behind their migration patterns and how they deal with own and others' conflicting perceptions of rurality. Place attachment and place ambivalence in the context of life course changes are the main theoretical perspectives that help us to understand return migration. They are applied in a Danish context and based on analyses of qualitative interviews the concepts are further developed. A main contribution of the study is to look at rural place from the different identity positions of returnees and on that basis nuance the concept of place ambivalence. Another contribution is the identification of specific discursive and action-based coping strategies that returnees utilise to counter external stigmatisation and inner identity battles.

## 1. Introduction

The past decades have witnessed widespread concentration of institutions of higher education, public services, cultural offers and employment opportunities in larger cities (Cuervo and Wyn, 2012; Hansen and Winther, 2012; Lorentzen and van Heur, 2012). Urban environments have to a great extent become 'centers of consumption, excitement and cultural sophistication' (Farrugia et al., 2014, p. 1038), which has gradually led to growth and development in urban places but to stagnation and shrinkage in rural places (Farrugia, 2016; Looker and Naylor, 2009; Polèse and Shearmur, 2006). Research emphasises how rural communities cannot accommodate young people, and how rural youth characterise their communities as lacking opportunities and being boring (Farrugia et al., 2014; Farrugia, 2014; Sørensen and Pless, 2017). Not least the lack of higher education possibilities has led to significant out-migration of young people to urban environments (Alston, 2004; Beck et al., 2009; Larsen, 2017).

While considerable research has focused on rural youth out-migration, fewer studies have examined the return migration of well-educated individuals to rural areas (e.g. Haartsen and Thissen, 2014; Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011; Riethmuller et al., 2021). To help fill this

research gap, the present study examines the experiences of Danish highly educated migrants, who have returned to their rural native place after years of living in an urban environment. To illustrate the magnitude of such mobility flows, statistics show that 14% of a year have returned to their native place by the age of 35, a figure that has remained stable for the past decade (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2021). More individuals return to municipalities in the vicinity of major Danish cities, whereas for more rural municipalities the return rate is closer to 12%. Rural return migration appears to be complex, not least because return migrants may have adopted lifestyles and outlooks that differ from those existing in their native rural community. Moreover, place hierarchies, often constructed by the media, which depict urban places as superior to rural places (Farrugia, 2016; Jensen, 2012; Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003), are also likely to influence place relations. Despite structural limitations and adverse discursive constructions, attachment to rural place is nonetheless noticeable not least due to family-related social ties and childhood/youth memories (Hall and Donald, 2011; Lewicka, 2014; Manzo, 2005) as well as different priorities in the family expansion life phase (Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016; Villa, 2000). Hence, research has shown that ambivalence is a characteristic of return migrants' relationship with their rural place (Bijker et al., 2012; Bijker and Haartsen,

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2012; Easthope and Gabriel, 2008), and this is also the case in the present study. It, nonetheless, triggers our curiosity that well-educated people with a relative high degree of economic freedom make the choice of moving back to their native place, when it is associated with certain reservations in relation to the cultural amenities and jobs it has to offer as well as the mentality of the local population, which the analysis will show.

With point of departure in the ways in which ‘moving back’ is discursively constructed, the purpose of this paper is therefore to understand the drivers and concerns behind the mobility patterns of returnees, the conflicts involved in their attachment to place, from where such conflicts originate and how they cope with these. On this basis, we seek to understand the paradoxical behaviour of resourceful individuals who return to places, towards which they have mixed emotions.

Following the introduction, the paper zooms in on the concepts of place attachment and place ambivalence in the context of life course changes, thereby contributing with further insight into return migration. Next follows an outline of the research settings and methods, before the paper moves into the empirical analysis, in which we explore the returnees’ experiences of rural living, and how these affect their place attachment as well as their considerations about staying or leaving. The paper concludes in a discussion of the contributions made to the literature on rural return migration.

## 2. Place attachment and ambivalence in view of return migration

### 2.1. Framing place attachment

The role of place in people’s everyday lives has changed due to the increased movement of people, capital, ideas and information (Gustafson, 2001; Urry, 2000; Wiborg, 2004). What is less certain, however, is whether this increased mobility weakens people’s attachment to place, or if it can coexist with and even strengthen ties to places (Båtevik, 2001; Fallov et al., 2013; Gustafson, 2009; Holton, 2015; Lewicka, 2011). Based on a review of extensive geographical research, Tomaney (2015) argues for multiple and changing place attachments and discards a binary division between cosmopolitan outlook and local attachment as unhelpful. Likewise, Masso et al. (2019) propose that people-place bonds are rooted across multiple and changing locales. In other words, we may have different place attachments over a life course, just as we may be attached to several places simultaneously. This sits well with Villa’s argument on: ‘the complementarity of rural and urban life and how people relate and move between these different contexts (both physically and mentally) throughout the life course’ (Villa, 2000: 485). It is therefore instructive to view place attachment as dynamic, influenced by multiple factors such as mobility patterns, life phase and social norms (see also Berg, 2020).

Place attachment can be founded on very specific as well as more symbolic or abstract features, in that people may feel attached to people, physical manifestations or events within a specific place or feel attached to atmospheres, environments and ways of life (Barcus and Brunn, 2010). Along the same lines, Berg argues that place attachment consists of four main dimensions: ‘social relations, materialities, the past and memories, and emotions and affects’ (Berg, 2020: 440). More often than not, place attachment is based on a combination of dimensions, and it seems helpful to consider the bonds between people and various aspects of place within the classical tri-partition of ‘affection (emotion, feeling), cognition (thought, knowledge, belief) and practice (action, behaviour)’ (Gustafson, 2006: 19). Place attachment based solely on knowledge and beliefs may be argued to be fairly shallow, whereas emotions and practices add more depth and strength to the bond between people and place.

This framework seems to hold certain merits in explaining people’s place attachment and return migration. Haartsen and Stockdale (2018) argue that a correlation exists between a strong social place attachment

and long length of residence, whereas attachment to the physical environment does not correlate with lengthy stays. This suggests that while it might be the physical characteristics that attract people to a given place, it is the social environment that binds people and ensures long-term stays. Hence, several scholars agree that social networks and proximity to family and friends are decisive in people’s motivation to return (Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011; Reichert et al., 2014), not least in the context of the life course change involved in family expansion (Hall and Donald, 2011; Lewicka, 2014; Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016; Villa, 2000). This underscores the significance of the affective dimension in return migration as this is closely interrelated with social ties. Rather than operating with a broad concept of social capital (Lewicka, 2014) that includes the local community at large, the analysis will show that a social capital founded on family and friends is associated with feeling attached to place. The larger community stirs far more mixed emotions. Other studies have concluded that it is prior place experiences that increase the probability of return migration (Davies, 2008; Emerek and Kirkeby, 2015; Faber et al., 2015; Feijten et al., 2008; Ní Laoire, 2007; Stockdale et al., 2000). Whereas this highlights the practice aspect of place attachment, embodied experiences arguably hold cognitive as well as affective aspects, so rather than singling out one of the elements, it appears to be the interplay between the three that is interesting to study in the context of return migration.

To underscore the point above, memories and nostalgia are central aspects of place attachment and are typically generated through cognitive, affective as well as practice-based relations. Our relationships to places develop and transform over time with the different life phases that we enter into, but memories of places can bridge past and present and thereby influence current relationships to places (Lewicka, 2014; Manzo, 2005). Hence, place memories provide an anchor point from which we can tell shared place-related stories and craft relationships with and attachments to places (Acott and Urquhart, 2012; Cross, 2015; Leyshon, 2015; Williams, 2008). Memories are thus crucial in making places matter, as attachment to former places can ‘act as markers or referents to past selves and actions’ (Chow and Healey, 2008: 364), and hereby provide a continuity to a person’s identity (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). In other words, places act as geographical markers in people’s life stories, of what used to be and what is, and thereby clearly play a role in relation to identity formation. This is a point we will return to below.

### 2.2. Attachment to rural place – symbolic hierarchies and ambivalence

Research demonstrates a widespread understanding of rural life as more traditional and less progressive than urban life (Leyshon, 2008; Rye, 2006; Sørensen and Pless, 2017; Wiborg, 2001), for which reason many young people feel out of place and dream of leaving (Beck et al., 2009; Gibson and Argent, 2008; Ní Laoire, 2000; Sørensen and Pless, 2017). In other words: ‘there is a connection between the dominant narrative about a good youth life as spatially bound to the city and the urban way of life and a sense of belonging, which is characterised by longing for getting out and away from the local area’ (Sørensen and Pless, 2017: 8). This points towards a discursively constructed hierarchy of places (Farrugia, 2016; Jensen, 2012; Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003). This discourse is also fueled by the media and popular culture in their depiction of rural places (Eriksson, 2010; Jansson, 2013), for instance Eriksson (2010) demonstrates how certain films associate rural places with a plethora of traits dissociated with urban modernity and thereby perpetuate a hierarchy of places. As mobility becomes a success criteria, rural people who are unable to or do not wish to migrate are positioned as failures (Farrugia, 2016). Thus for rural youth, migration seems to be the only way to move forward and to make a career for themselves (Argent and Walmsley, 2008; Beck et al., 2009; Corbett, 2007; Ní Laoire, 2000; Trell et al., 2012).

Education is a widely acknowledged explanation to rural out-migration, and several studies (Alston, 2004; Beck et al., 2009;

Farrugia et al., 2014; Gaini, 2015; Hayfield, 2016; Larsen, 2017; Ní Laoire, 2000) have demonstrated how rural youth is basically forced to leave their rural communities due to the centralised structures of higher education. Rural out-migration in search of further education is taken-for-granted among young people in achieving future aspirations, despite the loss to rural communities that this act represents (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2014; Cuervo and Wyn, 2012). Education is thus a practical necessity and a cultural norm, a way to gain control over one's life (Wyn, 2007) and to become something and somebody (Alloway et al., 2004; Corbett, 2007). As argued elsewhere: 'The strong internal imperative to "become somebody" and the external pressure on young people to obtain high levels of education lead to a double mobility imperative that is both social and geographical' (Pedersen, 2018: 37). This implies that mobility is not simply a means to a good education, it is also a means to personal development and self-realisation (Dahlström, 1996).

Living in an urban environment while pursuing higher education leads to expectations of social and cultural diversity, as well as expectations of jobs with opportunities of self-realisation (Dahlström, 1996; Fosso, 2004). Therefore rural youth pursuing higher education arguably educate themselves away from their native place (Dahlström, 1996). This highlights how rural-to-urban migration is not only a move through geographical places, but also a move through symbolic hierarchies (Farrugia, 2016). Sørensen (2015) found that people prioritise to live in places that they think will give them the highest status among their peers, and as the countryside generally rank lower than urban environments in the eyes of young people, they will be less likely to subscribe to the rural way of life. Choosing to return to one's rural place of origin after having lived in the city can therefore involve a difficult process of adjustment, because returnees must negotiate new positions in social and cultural hierarchies. Negotiations play out internally regarding their own perception of the return as a step backwards in terms of personal and career development, often indicating failure more than success (Easthope and Gabriel, 2008), as well as externally regarding the stigmatisation they experience from others related to their return (author, 2018b).

With out-migration being a prevalent cultural norm among rural youth, it is hardly surprising that return migrants experience tensions between their individual choices and the collective norms and prescriptions of the cultural groups, they have been affiliated with during out-migration and still feel a part of. Hence ambivalence in the returnee-rural place relationship is a likely outcome (Bijker et al., 2012; Bijker and Haartsen, 2012; Easthope and Gabriel, 2008; Gabriel, 2006). As identity formation is an on-going, continually negotiated process, people arguably hold several identities (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). Return migration is often motivated by the entrance into a new life phase of parenthood (Hall and Donald, 2011; Lewicka, 2014; Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016; Villa, 2000), and with an emerging parental identity comes new sets of values and priorities that fit well with the social bonding possibilities and the slower-pace qualities of rural places. The social construction of the safe, rural idyll has been argued to have a significant influence on parents' perceptions of the countryside, though in the face of everyday practices and experiences such images are also contested (Valentine, 1997). This leaves rural places with a complexity of meanings. Simultaneously, returnees hold an identity influenced by the urban environment of higher education, career opportunities and cultural amenities that is harder to fulfil within a rural setting, and such priorities and life trajectories different from local peers may also affect returnees' integration into local communities (Matysiak, 2022). In other words, returnees may have several place attachments (Tomaney, 2015) that coexist, and on that basis, the ground for ambivalence, tension and possibly identity conflict is laid. Interestingly, how returnees cope with such conflictual feelings has received limited research attention and will therefore be part of the subsequent analysis.

All in all, the theoretical discussion has highlighted the dynamic nature of place attachment influenced not least by life course factors,

and that the interplay between affective, cognitive and practice-oriented aspects seems a useful lens through which to examine place attachment. In terms of return migration of rural youth, ambivalent place attachment is argued to be a central characteristic. Internal negotiations over parental versus career priorities and external negotiations directed at peers seem to be at play, and together this demonstrates that return migration stirs emotions and touches upon identity issues. Based on this theoretical framing, the paper now progresses into its empirical part, starting with an outline of the research design and data.

### 3. Research setting, material and methods

In this paper, return migration is studied in the geographical context of two Danish rural municipalities, Skive and Mariagerfjord. The rural settings are located approximately an hour's drive away from the cities of Aarhus and Aalborg (the second and fourth largest Danish cities) and about a 4-hour drive away from the capital of Copenhagen (see Fig. 1). Seen in the context of other studies on return migration to rural areas (e. g. Riethmüller et al., 2021), these urban-rural distances are moderate and supposedly easy to overcome in terms of transportation and communication. In a way, the moderate geographical distance makes it even more interesting to study the ambivalent reactions of these returnees, as one might expect that relatively short geographical distances to one's prior urban place would ease transition.

Both municipalities have a population of approximately 44,000 people and cover an area of about 700 km<sup>2</sup> (Gregersen, 2017). Trade and transport are the main types of employment (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2021) and respectively one and two minor places of further education are placed here. Though the municipalities each have a main town of a certain size, Hobro (12,000 inhabitants) and Skive (20,000 inhabitants), both municipalities are officially characterised as rural municipalities (Danish Business Authority, 2017). Each municipality consists of 5 additional towns of 5000–1000 inhabitants, and respectively 20 towns (Mariagerfjord Municipality) and 14 towns (Skive Municipality) of 950–200 inhabitants (200 inhabitants being the official Danish limit for a town). In addition, 23,5% (Mariagerfjord Municipality) respectively 22,6% (Skive Municipality) live in villages and rural areas with fewer than 200 inhabitants (Trap Danmark, 2017, 2019). The two main towns each constitutes a local center for other towns and villages in the municipalities with the majority of shopping,

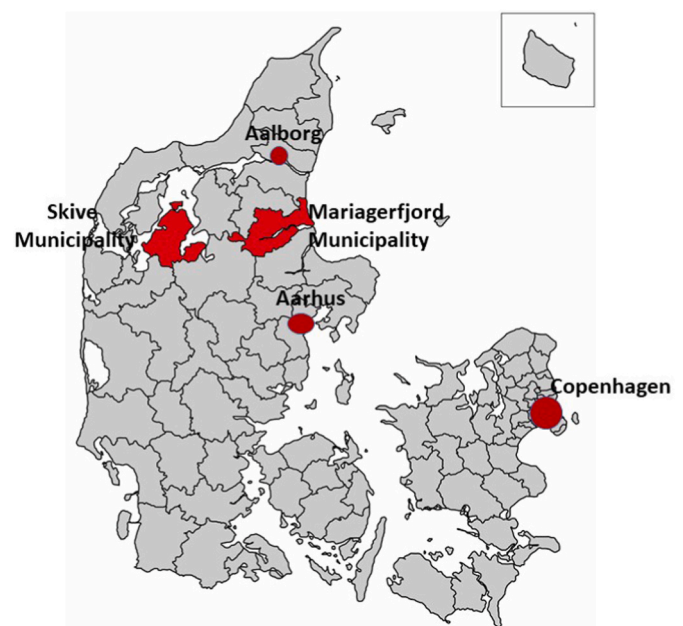


Fig. 1. Location of relevant rural and urban places.

employment and educational opportunities (mainly at high school level). Several towns and villages struggle to keep up a certain level of public services and infrastructure, and hence dependent on the local center town for such services.

The data consists of 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 19 persons with a rural upbringing (13 solo interviews, 3 interviews with partners living together), all ethnic Danes and from similar socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews were conducted in late 2015, and though a certain time gap exists between data collection and manuscript preparation, no major changes have occurred neither at the two locations studied nor in the rural-urban dynamics at a more general level. Therefore the data is deemed fully valid for shedding light on matters of rural place attachment. The interviewees are all returnees with a higher educational degree, who have moved back to their rural place of origin after years of living in an urban environment (ranging between 2 and 15 years). The interviewees comprise 12 females and 7 males aged 27–40 years. Most of the returnees are in the family life phase: they have a partner (16), as well as children aged 0–10 years (11). Some of the returnees have settled in the vicinities of their childhood place and not in the exact location where they grew up, and in most of these cases in a more urban place than their native place. In most cases, either the interviewee or his/her partner commutes to a larger city for work (12). The participants were recruited using referrals by acquaintances of the first author and snowball techniques, in that interviewees were asked to identify other highly-educated returnees in their local area. The authors had no prior knowledge of any of the interviewees, and whereas some of the interviewees were acquainted with other interviewees, they were not part of each other's social networks.

The interviews lasted 60–80 min, were conducted by the second author and took place in private homes, workplaces and cafés. Having previously lived in the two municipalities, the second author's migration biography provided an atmosphere of trust and understanding and paved the way for candid talks on the specific places. Simultaneously, careful consideration has been paid to avoid personal preconceived ideas about the two places to interfere with the research process (Meyer, 2001), and discussions among the two authors have also helped to counter this. To facilitate talks about place attachment, an interview guide was employed that focused on the migration biography of the interviewees, including their motives for moving back, whether expectations had been met and possible future mobility plans. Life course changes was a central part of the migration biography and continued to be central when the interview moved onto the topic of place belonging i.e. what makes one feel at home in a given place. Finally, place associations both one's own and those belonging to others were central to the interview, thereby touching upon possible peer influences on place attachment. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, transcribed verbatim and quotes translated into English. To ensure their anonymity, all interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms and identifying details of their localities have been altered. The interview data is analysed through a hermeneutically inspired interpretive analysis (Kvale, 1996), in which NVivo 11 for Windows is used to structure findings according to a number of categories and subcategories that are organised in nodes based on connecting points of similarity and overlap (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Continuously switching between the nodes and the full transcripts ensures that the richness and the context of the narratives are not lost, while analysis of the nodes across the data set allows broader structures of meanings and themes to emerge.

## 4. Analysis, results and discussion

### 4.1. Parental perspective on rural place

In line with the argument that place attachments are multiple and changeable (Berg, 2020; Masso et al., 2019; Tomaney, 2015), the present study shows how relationship to place is influenced by the course of our lives and positions adopted when relating to the place. In other

words, looking at rural place through the lens of the parent differs significantly from looking at rural place through the lens of the well-educated former urban dweller, and these two identity positions will help explain the ambivalence return migrants have towards rural place.

Looking at rural place from the perspective of the parent, several interviewees highlight a rural upbringing as different from and, in their view, superior to an urban upbringing. This is due to access to necessary facilities for children, a safer way of life than in the city, and not least strong social ties. Firstly, the materialities of the rural place that fit family life plays a role in the interviews – access to childcare facilities, schools and spare time activities, short distances between these and home are mentioned by several interviewees. For instance one mother says:

Most of our children's sports activities are basically in our backyard. That's nice. It's easy and accessible. It's also a huge plus that they can bike everywhere, so we don't have to drive them all the time (Camilla).

The material qualities of rural place are not, however, as significant a place attachment dimension in this study, as is demonstrated in Berg's (2020) examination of place attachment and wellbeing among middle-aged rural returnees. Here nature, in particular, plays a significant role. Differences in life phases may be one reason for this discrepancy, however, further research is needed to validate such conclusions.

Secondly, seen from a parental perspective rural place is associated with safety and valued for this characteristic. Its limited geographical size enables you to know both the people living there and the individual localities it consists of, as the quote below illustrates:

My upbringing was good, it was super safe, the place was small [...] I had the feeling that we almost knew each other all of us [...] You had the feeling that you were in control, that was what I felt. We could bike around - it was just safe. I think what I am trying to gain from a small community is control. I am trying to master this situation [of being a family with small children] (Anni).

Safety is clearly a positive feeling based on recollections of this person's rural childhood, and this demonstrates how embodied experiences form the basis of present day emotional attachment to place. As prior practices turn into memories, they become inseparable from affections, which underscores the argument that place attachment dimensions interrelate and are best understood in the context of each other (Berg, 2020; Gustafson, 2006). For several interviewees, relations to rural place are embedded in memories, and the interviewees' recollections of their own rural childhood result in positive evaluations of their native place as an optimum place to raise children. This is the case of Anni quoted above, as well as Jane: 'I would like to provide some of the same things [for my children] which I got, because it was rather good, and I have turned out quite well in the end' (Jane). Memories clearly act as a link between past and present (Lewicka, 2014; Leyshon, 2015), and though the interviewee ends off on a humorous note, own childhood experiences inform present-day parental choices without much critical reflection on what was good and bad in the past. So reconnecting to qualities of bygone times is clearly an integral part of this perspective on place, and though the return is staged as being for the sake of the children, the discourse points towards identity issues in terms of personal origin and the relatively new life role of being a parent, which is also supported by the subsequent quote:

Having kids, we realised that many of the things we needed and wanted to have in the local area, we could find here. You don't have the same need to go out when you have two small children and so on. And all the theatre stuff, cafés and such have faded into the background and therefore Aalborg no longer has the same pull, as it had when we were young and free. (Jens)

This attractiveness by proxy, i.e. portraying rural place as fulfilling

children's needs, simultaneously addresses parental ambitions of providing the best possible start in life for their off-springs. In order to do so, they return to their own well-known base, replicating at least aspects of their own childhood.

Thirdly, and most central to the parental perspective, is the social capital that rural place represents (Lewicka, 2014), though it is close relations that constitute the social capital rather than the broader local community. Being close to grandparents, in particular, but also to some extent other family members and friends is a recurrent theme in the data, and so the affective bonds that social relations create to rural place resonate well with the extant literature (Hall and Donald, 2011; Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016; Nedomysl and Amcoff, 2011; Reichert et al., 2014). Statements such as: 'There is no doubt that being close to the grandparents motivated us to return' and 'When we have small children we must be near the grandparents' underscore this point. Social ties also go hand in hand with safety, as family represents that which is well-known and predictable, and which the subsequent exchange shows is attractive to new parents. Apart from this, the quote also demonstrates how a place changes character as this couple enters into parenthood – from a place meant for visiting, to a place meant for living in:

Merete: When [during student years] we visited and went for a walk in the town, we thought we were never going to live here [...] and it was so nice to leave after a weekend.

Kenneth: It was just so nice to leave again.

Merete: But then something just happened when we had children.

Kenneth: Yes, definitely. It was then things changed.

Merete: Their needs were given priority and we thought that it would be good for them to be close to their grandparents. One thing is that we can use their help now and again, another thing is that the children can gain so much from being close to them.

Kenneth: This is the basis for a safe childhood.

Off-hand, the social construction of the countryside as safe (Valentine, 1997) is not contested by the returnees, as safety seems to rest mainly on the rural place being well-known, predictable and enmeshed with family ties. Later the analysis will, however, show that local community beyond family, which is a constituent part of rural safety according to Valentine (1997), is questioned, thereby leaving the rural less idyllic than what seems to be the case at first glance.

It is also worth noting that the convenience aspect of family networks is by no means negligent in the data, and whereas the literature referred to above is preoccupied with the affective aspect of social capital, this study also demonstrates that social capital comprises practice-oriented qualities, which alleviates the interviewees of some of the hard work of being a family with small children. This point is clearly underscored by the following statement: 'To us it was 95% about the grandparents. Instead of phoning them months ahead to arrange for them to babysit our children, we could gain some free time. Get some of our life back' (Lars).

#### 4.2. Urban dweller perspective on rural place

The last sentence of the above quote, 'getting some of our life back', indicates that other identities than the parental one are at stake in the returnees' narratives. The interviewees tend to switch between perspectives, and when looking at rural place through the lens of the well-educated, former urban dweller, shortcomings start to materialise. These are identified in terms of job opportunities, cultural amenities and services, as well as the more abstract mentality and way of life of rural places. Firstly, as argued elsewhere (Pedersen and Therkelsen, 2017), job opportunities and career prospects are not the main drivers for returning to rural place, as the majority of the interviewees, or their partners, commute to work in a larger city 30–60 min away. The

shortcoming of this material aspect of rural place seems in broad terms to be accepted, in view of the ideal context for family life that rural settings offer, however, some have a harder time reconciling their professional ambitions with their family dream. As shown below, a battle between identities leads to place ambivalence for this particular interviewee: 'It kind of feels as if those career dreams that you have, are shattered when you move back, and I guess I just have to adapt to the fact that it will be a more family-oriented life here' (Stine).

Secondly, the scarcity of cultural amenities of rural places is likewise accepted by most interviewees as these become secondary during the years with dependent children. In other words, going out, theatres and cafés have faded into the background, as expressed by Jens in the quote above. The availability of cultural amenities is, however, still missed by some returnees:

'But knowing that it's there, knowing that you can [...] buy whatever you want, at the moment you feel like it, although you may not do it, it has just been quite important [...] In that regard this place is extremely limited (Camilla).

Hence from the former urban dweller perspective, the rural place has its limitations, and the relative significance of cultural amenities is sustained by the fact that several interviewees expect to relocate in a city later in life, among other things, to enjoy such offers. This resonates with Matysiak's (2022) point that the cultural capital of returnees in terms of spare time preferences affect integration into the local community. However, the present study shows that lack of cultural offers and job opportunities, do not, cause the same level of concern and place ambivalence as the values and general worldviews that several interviewees associate with rural place. With reference to Barcus and Brunn's (2010) symbolic/abstract dimensions vs physical/concrete manifestations of place, it seems harder to stomach the former than the latter for the returnees. This is illustrated below:

There are so many mean-spirited people around here. [...] Those people who have lived around here all their lives become ... They are just really narrow-minded and have a very limited perspective on life. I think that characterises this place. Unfortunately, the core of this place is those people who have lived here their entire lives, and it's just ... across the board, they are just little people. (Jens)

This dissociation from local people's values and perception of the world sets this returnee apart from the rural place and leaves him in a state of limbo, being a part of and apart from the place at the same time. Here lack of physical mobility equals lack of mental mobility and this correlation between inner and outer characteristics is a powerful identity marker, which is repeated by other returnees:

It's not like I have stayed here all the time, because I kind of feel that ... Well, there are those people who have returned to this place and then there are those who never left [...] They just haven't developed in any kind of way. I know it's a bit harsh to say, but I really think that's why I emphasise that I have lived elsewhere. I have experienced the world. I've just returned. (Merete)

This discourse of 'us' versus 'them' establishes a social hierarchy between returnees and locals, and so this inter-place hierarchy between urbanity and rurality (Farrugia, 2016; Jensen, 2012; Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003) is reflected in returnee narratives when it comes to the values and worldview of returnees (us) and stayers (them). This sense of stagnation of rural place and stayer being stuck in old, less admirable habits is repeated by others: 'It is the same people who do not like each other, the same cliques. It's the same that is said behind your back, as it was back in high school. It's actually a little surreal that nothing really has changed' (Stine). Clearly the narrative of the rural idyll is contested here (Valentine, 1997), in that the qualities of the local community are questioned, partly because cracks in the idea of community appears (the returnee – stayer divide), partly because disagreement on values and worldviews may be at odds with a good (safe) place in which to raise

one's children. [Rauhut and Littke \(2016\)](#) also demonstrate that the local mentality may be a barrier to feeling a close affinity to the rural place, and though they have their attention directed at a local 'macho' culture founded on fishing and hunting activities, which is not relevant in the present empirical context, lack of openness to newcomers and latent xenophobia are.

External pressures may also help explain demarcations between returnees and stayers being set up, in that several returnees report prejudices about rural places and people on part of their urban friends, which may be countered through such hierarchies of rural people. Hence there are both internal and external drivers behind such coping strategies, which we focus on below.

#### 4.3. Coping with place ambivalence through discourse and practice

The coping strategies the returnees apply to handle internal as well as external conflicts over return migration are both of a discursive and practice-oriented nature. Justification of one's mobility choices is one way of handling critical voices, even stigmatisation, from members of cultural in-groups. With reference to parental ambitions, social ties and practical circumstances, such criticism is managed discursively, however, feeling obliged to justify one's actions indicates a negotiation of identities on part of this returnee:

You have to defend your actions a bit: The grandparents live here, it is cheaper than in Aarhus and arguments like that [...] He [a friend] thinks it is completely crazy that we have moved back here [...] we are almost stupid people. In his opinion, it is only people without an education that live in the countryside. (Jane)

Another type of discursive coping strategy detectable in the material revolves around temporality, in that several interviewees express an intention of leaving the rural place at some stage, typically when the children leave home. This may, on the one hand, be an illustration of the ongoing character of migration ([Berg, 2020](#)), and, on the other hand, an expression of mixed feelings towards rural place:

I think this place has what we need now and far ahead. But when our children grow older and fly the nest, we might move to Copenhagen to a small apartment, because then our children might live there [in Copenhagen] as well. (Camilla).

The temporality applied here is that of childhood, which depending on various factors (number of children, the time span between them, when they fly the nest) may span two or three decades. The quote also illustrates that re-negotiation of where to live in future will likely be triggered by the transition to an empty-nest life phase. Their memories of urban living hereby create a frame of reference for visions of a future place of residence, when their children get older, demonstrating how memories of places bridge time ([Lewicka, 2014](#); [Leyshon, 2015](#)). It is, however, interesting to note that speaking about the future from the position of being a parent with small children, this interviewee still sees her children as setting the agenda for her mobility patterns.

This temporary approach to one's place of residence is also expressed in the practice of keeping financial investments low. Some choose to rent accommodation, not out of economic necessity but to ease a quick exit, others buy an inexpensive house for the same reason. These are highly concrete actions, which are used discursively to stage oneself as a reluctant returnee, like in this specific example: 'I don't think we'll stay here for good. I really can't imagine that. But the house was so cheap, so we'll just use it as a holiday home [when relocating]' (Sasha). While such a non-committal approach to one's place of residence may be a reflection of opposing feelings towards rural place as argued above, it may also be a discursive strategy adopted to justify one's choices towards urban friends. Hence, both inner and outer driving forces may be at play here. Along the same lines, another interviewee expresses a need to be able to escape when she first arrived: 'When I moved here, the first thing I bought, before I even bought a sofa, was my car [...] it gave me

the feeling: Pew, I am not quite here'. (Helen). Interestingly, the data indicates that temporary return migration may be more a matter of discourse than practice. For instance, one interviewee reflects on how she envisages moving back to the city but ends up concluding that it is most likely not going to happen, due to her strong social connections to her present place of residence: 'That's what I say right now [a desire to leave for the city later on], and at the same time, I want to see it in reality' (Tove).

A third way of coping with place ambivalence and identity issues, which this study hints at, is through the practice of returning to a place one step removed from one's place of origin. One respondent explains it in these terms:

It's really awful to say this, but I think I would perceive it as a failure to move back home. And I can't say why, I just feel that way. It's completely irrational, and I don't really know what it's about. It's really strange. But that town is really up against some strong, strong emotions in me. (Anni)

Though she expresses happy memories of a safe and peaceful childhood, this interviewee simultaneously has a strong aversion to return to her exact native place, as it was also characterised by narrow-mindedness and social control. She has therefore settled down in a rural community close to her place of origin, which allows her to cherry-pick the favourable aspects of rural living, i.e. peacefulness, safe neighbourhoods and easy access to nature - all of which is suitable for family life, and thereby deselect the unfavourable mentality aspects associated with a specific rural place. This makes it easier for her to negotiate her choices in view of her experiences and identity, as it does not represent a step backwards but a step into a future suitable for children. Rather than an urban-rural place hierarchy ([Farrugia, 2016](#); [Jensen, 2012](#); [Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003](#)), an inter-rural place hierarchy seems to be at stake here which seems to assist this returnee in her identity project. More research is, however, needed on this matter, to be able to understand these inter-rural dynamics further.

All in all, the rural place attachment of highly educated returnees appears to be closely tied up with the different identities they hold and is hence characterised by ambivalence. Returnees appear to juggle internal and external pressures through various coping strategies and hence end up at the margins of their place of residence - simultaneously being a part of and apart from the rural place.

## 5. Conclusion and future research directions

This paper has explored the experiences of highly educated migrants, who have moved back to their native rural area after years of residing in the city. Urban place and rural place are continually placed on a comparative scale and thereby staged as distinct, not just in terms of landscape and cultural offers, but in particular in terms of social ties and way of life. The analysis, however, questions the dominant narrative of urban places as hierarchically superior to rural places per se ([Farrugia, 2016](#); [Jensen, 2012](#); [Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003](#)), as rurality in certain life phases and in particular from a parental identity perspective rank higher than urbanity. Likewise, place hierarchies are detected between different rural places and between the different people (stayers and returnees) in the same place.

In line with existing literature ([Bijker et al., 2012](#); [Bijker and Haartsen, 2012](#); [Easthope and Gabriel, 2008](#)), the returnees come across as ambivalent in their attachment to rural place, and a contribution of this study is to contrast different life phases and identity positions of returnees as a way of understanding this ambivalence. From a parental position, rurality is perceived as qualitatively better than urbanity mainly because of the safety it represents. Material factors such as access to daycare, schools and spare time activities and shorter distances are listed, but more importantly, the family-based social capital and own childhood experiences that rural places embody to returnees, are central safety features, which are treasured at the life stage of family formation.

Hence in view of Berg's (2020) place attachment dimensions, it is clearly social relations and its associated emotions and memories that take precedence over materialities, when looking at rural place through the eyes of the parent. This is also documented in other studies (Hall and Donald, 2011; Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016; Nedomysl and Amcoff, 2011; Reichert et al., 2014). From a highly educated, former urban dweller perspective, material lacks in terms of cultural amenities and job opportunities are mentioned and cause some of the experienced ambivalence, however, it is the more symbolic/abstract dimensions rather than the physical/concrete manifestations of place (Barcus and Brunn, 2010) that result in negative emotions. Hence, a particular finding of this study is the dissociation from local people's values and outlook on the world that returnees express, and which leaves them in a state of limbo and discontent with their rural place of residence. Hence paraphrasing Dahlström (1996), the returnees have not just educated themselves away from their rural place of origin in terms of formal education, but perhaps more importantly in terms of values and worldview. Though similar findings are made by Rauhut and Littke (2016), value clashes between stayers and returnees need further research attention in future.

The study also points to a number of discursive and action-based strategies, which returnees employ to cope with the internal conflicts (i.e. dominant self-perceptions) and external conflicts (i.e. peer criticism). Favoured discursive coping strategies are justification of one's return based on practical circumstances as well as referring to one's return as temporary. Action-based coping strategies include keeping financial investments to a minimum and migrating to a place one-step removed from one's place of origin. Such coping strategies are applied to counter social stigmatisation and inner identity battles. More research is, however, needed to flesh out the detailed characteristics of such coping strategies, how they are integrated into daily practices, and how they influence place attachment and personal identity.

Further research is also called for to expand our understanding of the place attachment of highly educated return migrants to rural places. Comparisons with other demographic groups may help us to understand these returnees even better, just as comparisons across regional and national contexts and in a longitudinal perspective would further our insight. Finally, both inter-rural and intra-rural dynamics is worth delving further into, firstly because attachment to native rural place may be difficult to geographically demarcate, and secondly, because hierarchies appear to exist not just across the urban-rural divide but also among neighbouring rural places and within the individual rural place. Hence, there are several important research avenues to pursue as regional and social inequality and personal wellbeing will also be critical issues to tackle in years to come.

## Credit Author Statement

Note: If two authors are mentioned, the first mentioned has the main responsibility.

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