Radically Ordinary Lives: Young Rural Stayers and the Ingredients of the Good Life in Finnish Lapland

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Abstract
This article focuses on young people who, despite the general tendency towards youth outmigration in rural areas, have decided to stay in their home town. We explore the agency of young, conscious stayers, as well as the process of staying in the northern Finnish town of Kemijärvi. The stayers’ values and perceptions of the constituents of a good life could be taken as an alternative to the prevailing Western ideal that emphasizes mobility and ambitious educational and career plans, and is, in part, driving young people to leave their rural hometowns. The stayers in this study are active participants in their own fate and are content with their choice of staying. Applying ethnographic methods, we undertake to learn what rural stayers consider the building blocks of a good life in a small-town setting, one offering comparatively limited options in terms of jobs, education and leisure activities.

Keywords
Well-being, Arctic, rural youth, rural stayers, youth agency

Introduction
A recently published regional newspaper article (Molkoselkä, 2020) titled ‘Young people in Kemijärvi drive around town because there is nothing better to do’ illustrates a common perception of what the lives of Finnish rural youth are like. Quoting four local young males, the article points to the lack of things to do in a rural

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town from young people’s perspective and highlights the perceived decline of the town. One of the young men captures the attitude of the four when he says: ‘I have not heard of any young person moving back here’ (Molkoselkä, 2020). This implies that life for young people in Kemijärvi is as idle as driving in circles. Certainly, many young people do end up leaving Kemijärvi. The local statistics indicate a decline of 50% in the number of 15-to-24-year-old residents in just 10 years (Tilastokeskus, 2020), which seems to underscore the young males’ perception of their home town as an undesirable place for young people to live in.

Kemijärvi is not alone in this development. Youth outmigration is one of the key challenges to the viability of peripheral and rural communities worldwide and in the Arctic. Like other Nordic countries, Finland has experienced population growth in larger cities and population decline in the surrounding smaller ones (Jungsberg et al., 2019, p. 23). The loss of young people due to outmigration is especially pronounced in peripheral and rural areas, and Lapland is among the country’s most seriously impacted regions (Aro, 2018; Karlsdóttir et al., 2020; Valtion nuorisoneuvosto, 2019). Due to the prevalence of outmigration, studies of young people living in rural areas initially focused on mobility and decisions to leave (Forsberg, 2019), but the past decade has witnessed a rising interest in studies of staying, returning and the life of young rural adults (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Haartsen & Thissen, 2014; Rönnlund, 2019; Stockdale et al., 2018).

In this article, we turn the spotlight on those young people of Kemijärvi who have decided to stay in their rural home town. We focus on the everyday life of young rural stayers and explore their thoughts on what constitutes a meaningful, ‘good’ life. In doing so, our case study discusses what could be considered an alternative view to the mainstream Western ideal of what the ‘good life’ should be like and how one can achieve it. We draw on similar studies (Looker & Naylor, 2009, p. 2021; Maersk et al., 2021; Trell et al., 2012) on rural youth and analyse the young people’s everyday context through an ethnographic case study showing how they develop a sense of belonging to their local place. The young stayers in our study have acted contrary to the prevailing discourse of mobility (Forsberg, 2019), where the expectation is that young people will move away from rural areas and moving is seen as a ‘rite of passage’ into adulthood. When mobility is the cultural norm (Komu & Adams, 2021), a conscious decision to stay represents a deviation from the norm, arguably making it ‘radical’, as the title of the article suggests.

We agree with Leyshon (2008) that the lives of young people in the countryside are multidimensional and complex and demand further analysis. He argues for the importance of conceptualizing young people as active agents who make their own decisions and form their own identities in rural areas (Leyshon, 2008). This view counters discourses that treat rural stayers as passive onlookers of their own fate who have merely been ‘unable to leave’. Their reasons for staying may be harder to articulate and may well be as complex and multi-layered as those for leaving or more so (Hjälm, 2014, p. 569). In this light, we argue against the putative assumption that people who stay do not really know why they do so, or that they just stay because they cannot drum up the initiative to leave. In the spirit of Stockdale and Haartsen (2018, p. 2), our case study defines the act of staying as a conscious decision and an ongoing process that may change during a person’s life course. In addition to the transition into adulthood, other key life changes work as triggers for staying or leaving, for example, starting a family or getting a career opportunity elsewhere.
Adams and Komu

In this respect, it may not always be useful to put people into fixed categories as ‘stayers’ or ‘leavers’.

We have decided to use the term ‘stayers’ in reference to the young people in this study because it is a notion they identify with and apply to themselves. We also distinguish between those who have consciously wanted to stay and those who have been unable to leave, for example, due to a lack of resources. Our informants could be described as ‘conscious and content stayers’, after Morse and Mudgett (2018), for they value their home place, have consciously decided to remain—or have expressed their will to remain—and are content with their decision. We want to contribute to the discussion on youth motivations for staying and the factors influencing this decision by focusing on the experiences of this category of stayers (see also Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018).

To date, there has been no work with an explicit focus on conscious rural stayers in Finnish Lapland. Most of the Finnish studies describe the lives of rural youth, in general, with a focus on Eastern Finland (see, e.g., Armila et al., 2016; Tuuva-Hongisto, 2018; Tuuva-Hongisto et al., 2016). Research elsewhere includes studies on life planning and perspectives of young people in the border region between Denmark and Germany (Yndigegn, 2003), as well as on the motives of young adults returning to their rural home regions in the Netherlands (Haartsen & Thissen, 2014). For their part, Fischer and Malmberg (2001) analyse the life course of (im-)mobility and attachment to geographical areas in Sweden, while Looker and Naylor (2009) focus on the life-course transitions of rural young people in Canada. We seek to complement these recent studies by describing rural places as seen by young people who are satisfied with their lives.

Rural Stayers: Going Against the Grain

Rural regions, as well as their young residents, are often the target of negative stereotypes. Rural youth are depicted as marginalized and disadvantaged (Leysshon, 2008) victims of a ‘mobility imperative’ that inexorably drives young people to leave their rural homes (Farrugia, 2016). Even among researchers, the term ‘immobility’ in the case of young people often has negative connotations (Looker & Naylor, 2009; Mærsk et al., 2021; Pedersen & Gram, 2018). Despite the concerns over the demographic decline of rural areas driven by youth outmigration, rural stayers often become negatively stereotyped as ‘lacking the agency to leave’ and ‘staying behind’ (Jamieson, 2000; Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018).

In Finland, the academic literature and public discussions tend to represent the Finnish rural north as a region in inevitable decay, one emptying of people and services, a marginal periphery in comparison to the southern growth centres (Armila et al., 2016; Lanas et al., 2013). Life in rural areas seems miserable when it is discussed in terms of statistics depicting declining economies, unemployment, outmigration, ageing of the population, lack of prospects, loneliness and high morbidity (Karvonen & Rahkonen, 2004, p. 77). What is more, these discussions seem to draw on an underlying assumption that having fewer options for services, a social life, education, work and leisure is tantamount to having a life that is less desirable or fulfilling.

Young people’s desire to move is shaped not only by structural constraints and a culture that normalizes migration but also by conceptions of the kind of life imagined
to be possible in their home region. In contemporary Western societies, definitions of success include a good career and material well-being, and discourses on mobility imply that this can be achieved by moving out of rural areas. Previously, it has been argued that in Finland, especially its rural areas, a ‘culture of migration’ prevails in which outmigration has become a key transitional phase in young Finns’ journey towards the ‘good life’ (Komu & Adams, 2021). To the Finnish youth, migrating appears as a way to ‘realize one’s potential’, while staying is seen as a sign of being ‘stuck’ (Hartikainen, 2016; Ollila, 2008).

In a culture characterized by mobility, the decision to stay may be taken as a waste of one’s skills and potential, thus framing the person as inadequate in some respect and his or her rural life as somewhat lacking. In turn, in Western societies, mobility is associated with success, higher social capital and life progress (Mærsk et al., 2021, p. 2). Indeed, most young people in Lapland see their future as being elsewhere, a common perception being that a ‘successful life’ is not possible if one stays in the region (Ollila, 2004, 2008). Young people find themselves under pressure to ‘make progress’ and educate themselves along their life paths—highly valued aims in Finnish culture. Adding to this is the legacy of the Protestant work ethic with its strong emphasis on individualism and work (Ollila, 2004). Among those young people who stay in rural areas, the cultural expectation of mobility may cause feelings of inferiority and failure as well as low self-esteem (Juvonen & Romakkaniemi, 2018, p. 7).

Nevertheless, some young people choose to stay in their declining home regions precisely because life there resonates with their understanding of what the ‘good life’ should entail. When young people envisage the good life for themselves in Lapland, the picture they paint is different to one of ‘success’. It consists of family, friends and relatives, social relations, hobbies and animals, as well as being close to and enjoying the peace and quiet nature offers (Ollila, 2004, 2008). A survey on the future dreams of Finnish youth found that rural centres like Kemijärvi were associated with notions of community spirit and a connection with nature, and that the small size of the community was considered a positive feature (Kuhmonen et al., 2016, p. 20). Moreover, the Finnish youth find remote rural areas attractive due to their association with the self-made life, in which entrepreneurship, personal freedom and nature-based activities play a key role (Kuhmonen et al., 2016).

In Finland, rural stayers are typically male, which is partly explained by the greater readiness of women to seek higher education (Sireni et al., 2017, pp. 31, 126). However, no further statistical information is available on what defines rural stayers. In any case, due to favourable government support structures and educational support policies, like study grants and youth housing, a lack of resources is not as common a problem preventing young people living in Finland as it might be in countries lacking similar benefits. The influence of socio-economic class on young people’s migration decisions has been studied, for example, in the UK (Jamieson, 2000). Because class differences in Finland, especially in its rural areas, are much less pronounced than in societies like the one in the UK, it is difficult to determine within the limits of this study the extent to which class background affects decisions to stay in rural areas. However, the lack of aspirations for higher education among our young informants, which we will discuss later, might be related to their having a more working-class family background.
Previous studies on rural stayers have emphasized the various ways in which stayers contribute to sustaining otherwise depopulating rural regions, maintain the local quality of life and act as potential contacts for those who have moved away (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018, p. 6). Here, we turn the gaze from what rural young people can offer their communities to what their communities can offer them. In this vein, we discuss, as Bjarnason and Thorlindsson (2006, p. 290) do, how ‘identification with a particular community has increasingly become a matter of personal choice and individual taste’. Furthermore, we argue that while these young stayers build their lives individually through dynamic interactions with their rural home town, a common feature of such lives is that they offer an alternative view to the Western norm on how to achieve the ‘good life’.

Materials and Methods

This work is an outcome of a larger research project titled ‘Live, Work or Leave? Youth well-being and the viability of (post)extractive Arctic industrial cities in Finland and Russia’, which examined the ingredients of youth well-being through qualitative, ethnographic research in northern Finland. This article is based on data that were collected between August 2018 and February 2020 in multiple visits to Kemijärvi, with these ranging in length from 2 weeks to a single day. The young people were mainly found through personal contacts of the research team members and through the local upper secondary school. Some contacts, like a former youth worker, were essential for linking us to young people, and through ‘snowballing’, we were able to locate additional young stayers.

While the majority of our young research participants expressed a desire to leave their home town, our focus, here, was on the minority among them who could be categorized as conscious stayers. We did not enter the field specifically searching for stayers, but they became a valid and interesting group of young people while researching the topic of well-being. For this study, we conducted 18 interviews (structured and unstructured) as well as three focus group discussions; the number of participants in the latter, who ranged in age from 16 years to 25 years, varied from three to seven (Flick, 2014). The participants in all focus groups were female stayers, which could reflect the fact that females were more likely, in general, to participate in research projects; moreover, the participants were a group of friends. In the individual, biographical interviews, we found several male stayers. Altogether, we met 12 young people who expressed their willingness to stay.

We refrained from asking standardized questions because we wanted our interlocutors to determine the most important topics taken up in the interviews themselves. The questions centred around the topics of what factors of well-being are important from their own viewpoints, the reasons why they had chosen to stay or leave and how they perceived life in their home town. While some interviews were arranged beforehand by directly contacting young people, other conversations took place during the field stays in Kemijärvi, with the participants being approached casually in different locations in the town centre. The data analysis followed a process of classifying and interpreting the material, which consisted of field notes, jottings, logs and interview transcripts (see Bernard, 2006, p. 389).
Various locations in the town of Kemijärvi served as meeting places, including the local upper secondary school, cafes, bars, restaurants and a campground. Through repeated visits to the field (Vitebsky, 2012), to some extent interviewing the same people in various settings, every return provided new opportunities to gain insights into processes young stayers go through and the choices they make. We were aware that we are dealing with sensitive personal life stories, and throughout the research process, we were open with our informants about how we would process and store the data. To protect the young informants from any possible exposure, their identities were anonymized. We considered the risks and vulnerabilities of conducting fieldwork in a small town, where ‘everyone knows everyone’, and paid special attention to emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation. Moreover, we refrained from telling the young people who our other informants were. The focus groups were initiated by young people themselves; they chose whom they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and stories with.

The Post-industrial City of Kemijärvi

Finland is a sparsely populated country most of whose area is considered predominantly rural. Its demography is characterized by a strong concentration of population in southern growth centres (Nilsson & Jokinen, 2020, p. 17). Educational and regional policy decisions have led to the closing of educational institutions in rural areas and to the centralization of various public services and leisure activities in growth centres (Kivijärvi & Peltola, 2016, pp. 5–6). Generally speaking, Lapland and other rural areas in Finland are seeing a decline in services, shrinking and ageing populations, and outmigration (Sireni et al., 2017, pp. 46, 14–15).

The municipality of Kemijärvi is located in Finnish Lapland around 12 km north of the Arctic Circle. It is categorized as a ‘rural centre’, which is a population centre located in a rural area (Helminen et al., 2014, p. 11). While outmigration from rural areas is a long-standing trend in Finland, the decline in population of rural centres like Kemijärvi only began in the 21st century (Sireni et al., 2017, p. 27). In 2019, Kemijärvi had 7,274 inhabitants with a population density of 2.07 inhabitants per sq. km (Kuntaliitto, 2019a). In 2019, only 6.3% of the population was between 15 years and 24 years of age (Kuntaliitto, 2019b). Today, 45.1% of the residents are pensioners, and the current yearly decline of population is around 1.3% (Tilastokeskus, 2020). Kemijärvi is located close (84 km) to Rovaniemi, which is the regional centre of Lapland.

In the 1960s, Kemijärvi, the centre of the municipality, was a rising industrial city with a population of 16,000 at its peak (Kemijärvi, 2017). The past of the city features big industries, like the pulp mill owned by Stora Enso Ltd. and the electronics company Salcomp Ltd. (the latter acquired by Nokia in 1983), which provided stable jobs and a solid basis for material well-being. When Stora Enso closed down the mill in the spring of 2008, it had a lasting impact on the entire city, as no industry sprang up to replace the companies that ceased operating as a result. Kemijärvi fast became a city where the percentage of residents’ income from government social benefits was among the highest in the country (Muhonen & Saarinen, 2018). Along with the population decline, specialized stores, such as those selling clothing, shoes, furniture and home appliances, closed their doors. At its peak, Kemijärvi had
45 local stores; currently, there is only one such store in addition to those of the big
grocery chains in the city centre (Takala, 2018). Kemijärvi has three comprehensive
schools (peruskoulu), one upper secondary school (lukio) and one vocational school
(Kemijärvi, 2020).

The nature that makes Finnish Lapland an attractive tourist and recreation
destination also provides the local young people with many options for outdoor
activities, such as trails for mountain biking, walking and skiing, and public fireplaces.
The other leisure activities supported span ice hockey, hunting, various music school
courses, frisbee golf, water ski jumping, swimming and Brazilian jiu-jitsu classes.
The community’s cultural centre (kultuurikeskus) houses the library, youth services,
exhibition rooms and space for cultural happenings (Kemijärvi, 2021).

Staying and Living a Radically Ordinary Life

Mærsk et al. (2021, p. 1) distinguished four categories of people with respect to (im)
mobility: ‘local stayers’, ‘regional commuters’, ‘regional in-movers’ and ‘distant
in-movers’. We focused on the ‘local stayers’—those who had deliberately chosen to
stay in Kemijärvi for the time being. Among ‘local stayers’, we included those who
had lived for short periods elsewhere with the intention of coming back as soon as
their education was completed or their employment ended. Some of the young
people in our case study were in the process of finishing up their education, while
others had already gained work experience in various jobs. None of our participants
were married, nor did any have children at the time of interviewing. Some had
already left their childhood home, while others were still living with their parents.
Our participants consisted of both present and future stayers, who explicitly
expressed their wish to stay in Kemijärvi.

Our young informants were aware that their decision to stay in their place of birth
was a rather ‘radical’ one. From their perspective, their rural homes were not defined
by inadequacies or a lack of options (see also Tuuva-Hongisto, 2018). Ironically, in
some cases, it was precisely the ‘lack of things’ that made Kemijärvi attractive:

I like living here because I don’t need anything else. Seriously, I don’t even miss having
any other kind of life. (Young Male, finishing his formal education)

Moreover, from the young people’s viewpoint, it was urban areas that lacked the
necessary elements to provide a good life. During a focus group discussion among
young females, when asked what they wished for in their home town, the participants
answered quite modestly: ‘a Chinese restaurant and a flea-market with some nice
used clothes’. Young stayers in Kemijärvi mentioned a number of positive aspects of
the town that made life there desirable, with those ranging from the clean and
peaceful nature and the possibilities for various nature-based activities to the social
life, as well as the convenience and comfort a small place can provide in comparison
to urban centres. They also expressed a strong attachment to their home community
and to its nature.

Much as in the case study of Estonia’s Järva-Jaani, where the social life of
young people revolved mainly around two places (the House of Culture and a local
hamburger kiosk; Trell et al. 2012), the young people in Kemijärvi organized their
lives between their hobbies, their homes and driving around with vehicles during their leisure time. Depending on the group of people, they would either meet up during their hobbies (e.g., at the hunting association or music school) or in private homes. Younger youth would also meet at the local youth centre, but this represented an environment supervised and controlled by professional adults.

Thin (2016) argues that research and policymaking often tend to assume that well-being is determined by certain characteristics of places as well as place attachment. Instead, he calls for an understanding of well-being as the result of people’s dynamic interactions with places; these figured prominently in our case study. Previously, we have argued that the same place characteristics may prompt a desire to stay or a desire to leave, depending on the person in question (Adams et al., 2021). In the following, we discuss the various factors that comprised a satisfactory rural life for young stayers.

**Willingness to Compromise: Education and Employment**

One of the most common reasons why many young people move away from rural and peripheral areas is a lack of educational or employment opportunities. We suggested, however, that this is more a question of whether the area offers the kinds of job opportunities that correspond to individual desires (Komu & Adams, 2021). What really seemed to differentiate the stayers from the other young people in our research was their willingness to accept compromises with regard to employment aspirations in order to be able to stay. In fact, the stayers emphasized their willingness to adapt to different jobs because they valued staying in Kemijärvi more than their most sought-after job, which, according to them, would ‘just’ provide an income. The stayers in our study did not seek academic success or have plans for higher education, aims which usually prompt young people to leave rural areas (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 103); rather, they had chosen their educational paths according to what the local community had to offer (see also Juvonen & Romakkaniemi, 2018, p. 326). Some young people did go elsewhere for education but with the resolute goal to return as soon as possible.

The above-mentioned finding differs from the results of a recent Norwegian study indicating that, among girls, those who did not expect to go on to higher education were the ones who wanted to move, whereas a larger number of those who wanted to pursue an education wished to stay in their home town (Eriksen & Andersen, 2021). Our results indicate that being content to stay may be easier for those who do not have strong educational or career ambitions, unless the desired career is possible in their specific rural home area. Given the small number of participants in our study, no extensive generalizations can be made.

Most of our research participants did not have great career ambitions, but they showed considerable diligence in searching for jobs that would allow them to stay. Despite their relatively young age, some of the stayers had changed jobs a number of times and adapted repeatedly to what was on offer. One young female told us that after graduating from upper secondary school, she worked in a grocery and hardware store as a cashier, cleaned trains, helped out in the family business and completed an internship in the elderly care sector, although she decided not to pursue employment there due to a lack of interest.
Another young female had commuted during the tourist season to Pyhä, a ski resort some 50 km from Kemijärvi, to clean cottages, and worked at a local store. For both women, work was not the most important ‘life goal’, but at the same time, they pointed out that they would do not just any job, citing elderly care as an example, which in their view ‘requires more skills and genuine interest’. Employment was considered important, but if there was nothing available in the region, the stayers would rather commute or remain unemployed than move away:

I would rather drive to Rovaniemi daily than move there. In fact, I did that for quite some time. I did not want to move to Rovaniemi during my education and I arranged with an elderly man who was commuting daily to get a ride to Rovaniemi and back. I would do the same for work. At times I have been unemployed but that is okay because I don’t need that much and if I lived elsewhere, my living costs would be a lot higher. (Young Female, finished formal education)

The Perks of Living in Kemijärvi

The importance of nature and the space, peace and freedom it offers, as well as a family-centric way of life, have been noted in previous studies on the lives of the Finnish rural youth (Tuuva-Hongisto, 2018; Tuuva-Hongisto et al., 2016). For the young stayers in Kemijärvi, the surrounding nature was an essential part of their well-being:

It’s hard to find the right words to describe how much nature means to me. It’s hard to explain to an outsider what exactly peaceful nature is. You have to experience it yourself and you will feel the difference once you don’t have access to it anymore. (Young male, upper secondary student)

For the stayers, the connection to nature had a high priority because so many of their activities were outdoor-oriented. This evoked the way of life where mixed economies played a role and where part of one’s subsistence had to be hunted, caught or collected. In bigger cities, this lifestyle would not be possible to the same degree. It was precisely nature that separated the urban from the rural, physically and mentally (Tuuva-Hongisto, 2018, p. 29).

In examining the fact that people have fewer options when it comes to services, social life and leisure in rural places, we found that our research participants did not feel the need for more options as they were satisfied with what was being offered or saw the positive side of living in a declining town. For example, the living costs were much lower than they would be in a bigger city elsewhere in Finland, and the local real estate market showed that housing was quite affordable (Mykkänen, 2015). Two of our research participants bought a house for just €20,000 and were convinced that they could not be the owners at such a young age (in their early 20s) in another town. With lower living costs, one’s standard of living could be higher with a lower income. This presented the perceived marginality and decline of such towns in a different light.

Also among the frequently cited negative features of rural places were long distances. However, the young stayers did not perceive these as a problem if they had good means of transportation (also see Komu & Adams, 2021); quite the contrary,
they said that they did not mind driving longer distances. Accordingly, owning a car was essential for many rural young people because it meant the ability to move around freely and more possibilities to reach more distant workplaces. While the young man quoted in the newspaper article claimed that he and others drove around ‘because there is nothing else to do’ (Molkoselkä, 2020), for the young stayers in our study, driving around was a pleasure:

Of course I have a car! It’s old and a bit rusty but it works and it takes me and my friends places. Sometimes we just drive around and enjoy the ride without having a specific destination. (Young Female, recently finished formal education)

As the aforementioned example shows, one of the popular free-time activities for young people was driving around town in their cars. Other potential activities included hunting in the vast forests, hiking, skiing, playing an instrument with peers at the music school and intensive computer gaming. The desire for ‘something else’ was not particularly pronounced. Rovaniemi, being relatively close (around 80 km), provided young people with a movie theatre, a variety of shops, restaurants and bars, all of which they made use of on a regular basis. It was vital to recognize that rural youth also enjoyed ‘urban’ forms of entertainment but, at the same time, were keen to signal that they were different to urban youth by locating themselves both within the rural area and beyond (Leyshon, 2008).

Our participants made a clear distinction between what they required for living (housing, food and relationships) and what they viewed as ‘extraordinary entertainment that one doesn’t require on a daily basis’ (movies, restaurants, cultural events and the like). In some cases, this meant that playing computer games was so central to individuals’ understanding of a good hobby that no other entertainment was really required. These findings indicated that the perks of living in Kemijärvi were determined by individual preferences and assumptions of what a ‘good life’ meant. Next, we highlight considerations that are beyond individual choices and enhance the personal well-being of young people: the role of the community.

**Being One’s True Self and Belonging to a Community**

To be content with their lives, the young stayers said they had to feel that they could embrace who they are as individuals. Depending on the person, the small social circles of their home town could feel restrictive and leaving could seem like a way to gain more freedom, for example, to dress as one wishes. However, the stayers felt that they could be ‘their true selves’ only in their home town. They expressed that they felt alien in other towns, and that they could ‘be as they are’ in their home town, where everyone knew them:

Here a person is recognized through actions. In a bigger city it’s more about appearance. Nobody knows how you are and who you actually are. But here everyone knows you. (Young Female, active church member)

Rural places, in general, are known for strong social ties, which for young people can result in a desire to either stay or leave the community (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 102). The value given to close family and kinship ties and the desire to maintain
these, evident in our case study, has figured prominently in similar rural studies. For example, in the case of Vermont (Morse & Mudgett, 2018, p. 267), fondness for rural place–based attributes and family ties were the key drivers in conscious stayers’ residential decision-making. Other studies have noted that a positive social life in rural places may outweigh the negative impact of the sparse and distant services (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018). The desire to remain close to significant others may be valued more than the opportunities available in urban centres (Cook & Cuervo, 2020).

As an example of their desire to maintain close social ties, many of the stayers in our study live close to their parents or even share a household with them. In Finnish culture, staying with one’s parents is generally viewed as peculiar and immature, unlike in other cultural contexts, where young people might even be expected to stay at home. Indeed, leaving one’s parental home is often seen as necessary for a youth to become an independent adult. The young stayers in Kemijärvi are very much aware that they are acting against the ‘common cultural norm’ by staying with their parents.

Moreover, for our young stayers ‘being one’s true self’ meant finding a suitable partner who would also be willing to stay in the region; this was not always easy in a small town where ‘everyone knows everyone’ and new arrivals were a rarity. According to our informants, dating platforms like Tinder were difficult to use because of the degree of familiarity within the town. In addition, from the young stayers’ perspective, there always seemed to be someone from the family who had left and was missed. Many of their friends had left Kemijärvi after secondary school, at the age of just 15 years or 16 years.

Therefore, the role of various communities, such as religious congregations, sports clubs, workplace communities, hunting associations or music schools, was an important one in creating a sense of belonging and being connected to others, and the majority of our informants were engaged in one or more such communities. Our participants said that they were not only actively engaged in youth activities but also held different positions of responsibility within their respective communities. Being active in organizing events, taking responsibility for ‘passing the traditions on to the next generation’ and being part of keeping the community active could make young people feel that they were needed and their input was valued, which became apparent in their conscious decision that they had a purpose in staying.

Conclusions

The choices made by the stayers in our study challenge the assumption that the life of young people in rural towns is determined by the mobility imperative, that is, that success and a ‘good life’ can be achieved only by moving out of rural areas. Indeed, the stayers’ values and perceptions of the constituents of the good life could be taken as an alternative to the prevailing Western ideal that emphasizes mobility, ambitious educational and career plans and is, in part, driving young people to leave their rural home towns. Our title is a reference to the fact that, as ordinary as their lives may sound, the idea that a young person could live his or her life to the fullest in a small town, one with a limited number of options available, is a radical notion contrary to the current cultural values of mobility, progress and ‘success’. Moreover, by continuing to live with or close to their parents, our informants challenge the contemporary Western way to categorize ‘life stages’, which assumes that one must leave one’s childhood home in order to become ‘independent’.
However, ‘content staying’ seems to require a set of priorities in which the small scale of social life and the characteristics of the rural way of life are put above the pursuit of individually meaningful work and conventional ideas of success. All of our participants shared a hesitance with regard to pursuing a higher education, which made their decision to stay easier. While the lack of educational and career possibilities in rural areas is typically taken as a feature that exposes rural youth to marginalization and vulnerability, the youth in our study challenge this notion by building desirable lives for themselves despite these apparent shortcomings. We have shown that young, conscious and content stayers have found balance in their community and therefore do not see their rural home town as a place that lacks certain features but rather as one that provides them with the most important elements affording them a good life. From this perspective, it is the urban centres that appear to be lacking the features that could provide one with the ‘good life’. Thus, this study answers recent calls to discuss rural staying and immobility also in terms of the advantages it can bring, not only its shortcomings (Mærsk et al., 2021).

Previous studies have shown that staying in rural places can be advantageous to urban life in maintaining close social relations and social capital (Eriksen & Andersen, 2021; Mærsk et al., 2021). Close social relations are also considered an ingredient of the good life by our informants and a reason to stay—even though, unfortunately, rural life is simultaneously marked by people leaving and the small social circles making finding a partner more difficult. As showcased by our example of our young informants buying their own homes, our results demonstrate that staying can also provide material benefits by offering affordable but high standards of living. Easy access to nature and the feeling of ‘having space’ are also unique benefits provided by rural living that could be given more attention.

It is important to acknowledge that young people can have a different perspective on place over time (Leyshon, 2008), that is, our research participants might choose differently later on in their lives and leave Kemijärvi at some point. Therefore, we emphasize that staying is best discussed as a process. At the same time, we need to remember that moving to urban centres is not the ideal thing that everyone is striving for (Tuuva-Hongisto et al., 2016, p. 28). In light of our results, we call for serious public and scholarly discussions that would address the advantages that declining rural regions can provide in terms of well-being over urban growth centres. Our empirically grounded insights have shown that there are various ways of perceiving a ‘good life’, and that one such alternative can be a ‘radically ordinary life’ like that described and analysed in this study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This publication was supported by the Finnish Academy-funded project Live, Work or Leave? Youth—wellbeing and the viability of (post)extractive Arctic industrial cities in Finland and Russia and by the University of Vienna (uni:docs fellowship).
1. Title translated by the authors from Finnish.
2. Quotations translated by the authors from Finnish.
3. Peräkammarinpoika (roughly translated as ‘boy who lives in the back room’), for example, is a derogatory Finnish term that can be used to refer to unmarried young men who continue to live with their parents or in their rural home regions beyond the age when men are expected to move out. The term suggests that such men are lethargic and somewhat ‘pathetic’ in the eyes of society. Interestingly, no corresponding term exists for women in a similar situation.
4. The quotations have been translated from Finnish by the authors.

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