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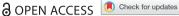
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ABSTRACT

Although the outmigration choices of young adults from peripheral to urban regions to attend higher education have been researched extensively, young adults' decisions to stay in, nearby, or return to, the peripheral home region have received less attention. This paper explores how young adults who are engaged in higher education re-imagine narratives related to notions of 'leaving' in their mobility biographies to justify their choice to stay in or return to their peripheral home region. We conducted in-depth interviews with postgraduate students in peripheral regions in Denmark and the Netherlands. Our findings confirm the existence of a mobility imperative for young adults in peripheral regions reproduced by both our participants and their social relations. However, we additionally find that young adults re-imagine narratives of 'leaving' which simultaneously correspond with contemporary discourses on place and residential mobility in the form of valuing (dis)connection to place, experiencing urban lifestyles, and life phase transitions, but which also open up possibilities for re-evaluating the attractiveness of often stigmatized peripheral regions. We suggest that narratives of 'leaving' during higher education help young adults to build what we call 'symbolic mobility capital' to mitigate the negative connotations related to living in a peripheral region.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, young adults' residential mobility patterns have transformed in accordance with changes in the higher education system in Europe (Finn and Holton 2019b). Higher education institutions have changed from being exclusive places for a small and often elite part of the population in European countries (Massey 2005) to being characterized by massification and widened participation (Osborne 2003) of a larger percentage of the youth cohort (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009). In most European countries,

one-third of the adolescent group will obtain higher education at the master's level (Statistical Office of the European Communities 2018). Consequently, higher education culture and the location of higher education institutions shape and influence the lives, residential and everyday mobility, and identities, of an increasing number of young adult Europeans.

In the field of youth identity and student mobility research, the place of origin in the form of 'rural' or 'urban' has been acknowledged as a significant identity indicator for young adults. Pedersen and Gram (2018) show how the 'rural' and the 'peripheral' are perceived as 'uncool' places that lack opportunities for young adults (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018; Haartsen and Strijker 2010; King and Church 2013) and are downgraded as places where young adult life can happen. At the same time, recent research shows that being a 'mobile' individual has become a resource for transitioning into adulthood (Cairns 2014; Thomson and Taylor 2005). Mobility experiences have thus become vital assets in the personal biography of individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Papatsiba 2005) because mobile behavior is assumed to be related to the obtainment of symbolic and cultural capital (Holdsworth 2009). Geographically mobile behavior in the form of 'leaving' is associated with 'moving forward', personal development and obtaining social capital (Nugin 2014), whereas geographically immobile behavior is perceived as 'staying behind', 'failure to leave' and low social capital (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Looker and Naylor 2009). This applies to young adults in general (Cook and Cuervo 2018; Forsberg 2017; Hjälm 2014) and to young adults in higher education in particular (Christie 2007; Finn 2017; Finn and Holton 2019b; Holdsworth 2009; Holton and Riley 2013). However, current student mobility research shows how young adults tend to relocate to a university in proximity to their 'home' region (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018) which calls for a more dynamic understanding of young adults' staying or leaving behavior as part of a continuous process rather than a unique one-off event (Finn 2017; Stockdale, Theunissen, and Haartsen 2018; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018; Coulter, van Ham, and Findlay 2016), and where residential mobility might lead to return migration to the home area or the home region at a later stage in life (Haartsen and Thissen 2014).

We follow this line of reasoning and claim that the social stigma of rural or peripheral places can actually be diminished through experiences of residential mobility and 'leaving', imagined or actual. This article aims to investigate how young adults re-imagine their own mobility biographies in relation to contemporary discourses of the peripheral region as a place where successful adulthood (Haartsen and Thissen 2014, 99) is not obtainable with their personal choice of staying in or returning to said regions. We aim to answer the following question:

> How do young adults who are engaged in higher education in peripheral regions re-imagine narratives of 'leaving' and transition into adulthood in relation to their choice to stay in or return to their peripheral home region?

To investigate this issue, we follow in the footsteps of Finn and Holton (2019b), who find that young adults' identity performance should be given specific attention when researching the mobility practices of young adults during higher education. They further argue that student mobility research should include attention to political and educational discourses and the specific geographical and social practices that they simultaneously value and exclude.

We conducted this research in two peripheral regions in southwestern Denmark and the northern Netherlands. Both regions have urban areas with higher education institutions, Esbjerg in Denmark and Groningen in the Netherlands. Similar to other peripheral regions, both the regions of southwestern Denmark and the northern Netherlands suffer from the outmigration of young adults to metropolitan and more centrally located urban regions (Sørensen and Holm 2019; Thissen et al. 2010).

2. Research on higher education student mobility

This research is framed into the two combined concepts of the 'mobility imperative' (Farrugia 2016) and the 'student experience' (Holdsworth 2009). Farrugia's mobility imperative constitutes a spatial and social context in which young adults need to make mobility decisions. The student experience as discussed by Holdsworth contributes to an understanding of mobility/'leaving' as a form of symbolic capital intertwined with identity development during the time of higher education.

2.1. Outmigration as an imperative in spaces of centralization and the knowledge economy

Outmigration from peripheral regions has previously been explained mostly by structural inequalities between peripheral and urban regions (Hansen and Niedomysl 2009); specifically, higher educational institutions are located in urban core regions, which draws away (soon-to-be) highly educated young adults (Drozdzewski 2008; Laoire 2000; Thissen et al. 2010). Research has confirmed these trends in the context of both the Netherlands (Thissen et al. 2010) and Denmark (Faber, Nielsen, and Bennike 2015), and researchers have begun to talk about a socio-spatial stigmatization of peripheral regions (Meyer, Miggelbrink, and Schwarzenberg 2016). For young adults, in particular, this stigmatization results in what Pedersen and Gram (2018) refer to as a subtle 'uncoolness of place' that young adults can escape through migration (Faber, Nielsen, and Bennike 2015). Farrugia (2016) captures this mix between the structural and social reasons that young adults leave rural and peripheral regions in what he calls a 'mobility imperative': young people are faced with an expectation of moving away because if 'young people wish to take up the subjectivities offered by contemporary youth culture, they must become mobile, either imaginatively or through actual migration' (Farrugia 2016, 843). Farrugia finds that young adults feel forced to respond to these imperatives in some way and that young adults will 'construct subjectivities and biographies through the mobilization of material and symbolic resources distributed across urban and rural spaces, and form affective attachments to new and old spaces before and after mobility' (Farrugia 2016, 848). Consequently, young adults who choose not to follow the directions of the mobility imperative still feel the need to construct their personal biographies in accordance with it.
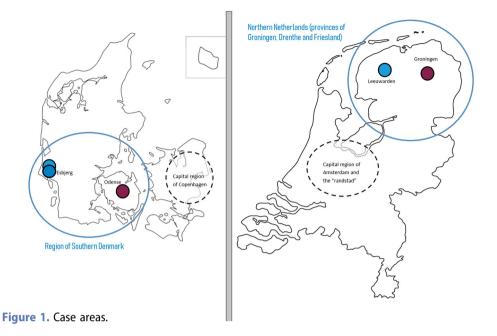
2.2. The 'student experience' and transitioning to adulthood identity

Finn and Holton (2019b) emphasize that student mobility needs to be understood at the regional and local level in a way that is sensitive to the contemporary experiences of

university students. They build on earlier work from Holdsworth (2006, 2009), who finds that student mobility is socially constructed through taken-for-granted assumptions about how mobility contributes to transitions to adulthood. She notes that 'the expectation that going to university means moving away continues to shape students' experiences of and attitudes to university life' (Holdsworth 2006, 1849). The transition to adult identity occurs through the 'student experience', which is accessed by leaving the home locality and is associated with independence and autonomy (Holdsworth 2006, 1857). A growing number of researchers emphasize that the normativity of student mobility behavior is related to higher education as an opportunity for the accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Jamieson 2000; Rye 2006; Nugin 2019) in the form of either educational titles or self-development and identity transformation (Finn and Holton 2019b; Yoon 2014). The intertwining of the culture of higher education with mobility expectations for young adults has also been found in other European contexts (Farrugia, Smyth, and Harrison 2014; O'Shea et al. 2019), not least for young women, who have a higher tendency to leave the peripheral region to pursue higher education (Faber, Nielsen, and Bennike 2015; Wiborg 2003). Other researchers have drawn similar conclusions about residential mobility as part of 'rites de passage' for young adults; however, it seems that geographical location as well as social background nuance the effect of this predisposition for young people to move away (Mitchell, 2003). According to Finn (2017), student mobility should not be reduced binary events because this tends to neglect the dynamic of significant 'affective experiences'. Finn (2017) builds on emotionally infused reflexivity from Holmes (2010) as an analytical tool for 'thinking about how decisions and orientations towards work, study and mobility involve emotional processes as well as inculcated social and cultural knowledge' (Finn 2017, 745). Thus, the time of higher education simultaneously becomes an opportunity for educational progress and a specific life phase characterized by opportunities for identity transformation and self-realization related to the mobility experience (Papatsiba 2005). From this perspective, the identity dimension is central when making sense of young adults' mobility behavior. In summary, following the theoretical framework of Farrugia (2016) and Holdsworth (2006), we assume that young adults who have chosen to stay in or return to their peripheral home region will construct narratives that link their geographical mobility experience with narratives of accumulating symbolic resources in the form of identity transformation, self-realization, independence and autonomy. We expect this emphasis to be related to their spatial context of the stigmatized peripheral region in which they have chosen to remain or to return.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Research settings

The settings for this paper are two peripheral regions: the region of southwest Denmark and the region of the northern Netherlands. In the Netherlands, most urbanized core areas are located in the west of the country surrounding the capital of Amsterdam and the polycentric 'Randstad' area. In a similar way, the region in southwest Denmark is in geographical opposition to the capital core area of Copenhagen and its surroundings on the island of Sealand to the east. Both regions have two main urban centers

Figure 1. Case areas.

(Odense and Esbjerg, Groningen and Leeuwarden) where several higher education institutions are located (see Figure 1).

3.2. Recruiting participants

The 20 interviews for this paper were conducted with postgraduate students from comparable master's programs at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU), University of Aalborg (AAU) and University of Groningen (UG). SDU and AAU share a campus-site in Esbjerg. The participants were all born in villages, towns, cities or rural areas in the region of the university where they pursued their postgraduate education. Participant recruitment ended when the point of saturation was achieved according to the researcher. The resulting sample included 10 male and 10 female respondents. Of these, 8 pursued a master's degree at SDU, 3 pursued a master's degree at AAU, and 9 pursued a master's degree at UG. Most participants were between 23 and 26 years old, while two students were 37 and 43 years old at the time of the interview. These were included as it corresponds with earlier findings of peripheral stayers tending to be older than the average student (Mærsk et al. 2021).

3.3. Interviews and narrative approach

By exploring the narratives related to the mobility biography constructed by the respondents in this research, we identified the role of 'leaving' in the identity production (Riessman 2008) of young adults in higher education in the context of the peripheral region. We explore the 'fusing' of the mobility experience by looking at the role young adults give to this experience, how they frame it in relation to place and to their own identity development. We pay close attention to how the relational context (Mason 2004) of the young

adults in the form of family, friends or other influencers (Thomassen 2021) in the narratives of the respondents. The interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo in several rounds following the narrative thematic field analysis approach (Rosenthal 1993). The analysis consisted of reconstruction of the subject's own interpretation of and reflections about experiences of mobility, place, relations and identity construction and the thematic classification of these experiences (Rosenthal 1993, 61). Additionally, by tracing the classification of the peripheral location by the respondents, we follow Hickman and Mai (2015) and Eriksson (2015), who emphasize that the notion of place is closely related to narratives of mobility and identity construction.

The 20 semistructured interviews took place during the period from March to July 2018. Of these, 18 interviews were conducted on or near university campuses, and two interviews were conducted online via Skype. The respondents were interviewed individually, and the interviews lasted between 45 and 120 min. The interviews started with the time when the participants entered higher education and ended with their graduation and dreams of the future.

4. Results

4.1. Local leaving and regional staying

At first glance, the mobility biographies varied greatly between the 20 interviewees (see Table 1) in our analysis. However, regardless of their actual mobility experiences, the narratives they related to their mobility choices were strikingly similar, as will be further developed in the next two subsections.

Our data show a strong sense of multiscalarity of mobilities in our respondents' narratives. Experiences of leaving, staying and returning to their local place of origin (the locality, village or city they grew up in) had very different connotations than experiences of leaving, staying or returning to the home region (the province in which their place of origin was located). Where staying in the local home place was related to fear of stagnation and stigmatization, staying in the home region was related to a sense of belonging and staying close to relatives, often parents, combined with new possibilities. Most of the participants identified with being stayers in the home *region* while simultaneously considering themselves leavers from their home *village*. On the local level, our respondents' perceptions can be classified into three different mobility categories:

1. 'Local stayers' (2/20), who *stayed in their home locality/village/city* where they grew up,
2. 'Local returners' (5/20), who *returned to the home locality/village/city* where they grew up after having temporarily lived somewhere else, either in or outside the region, and
3. 'Local leavers' (13/20), who *left the home locality/village/city* where they grew up and did not return.

However, it also became evident that the multiscalarity of their place of origin played a vital part in the narratives of our respondents. We discovered that the 'Local stayers', 'Local leavers', and 'Local returners' re-imagined their mobility narratives by clearly distinguishing between the leaving the local and leaving, returning or staying in the region. In the context of the region our participants identified as:

Table 1. Mobility biographies and self-narratives.

No.	Grew up in	Now lives in	Mobility biography and self-narratives
Jan Age 25 Male	Emmen	Groningen	Grew up in two small villages in the North Netherlands. Moved to Groningen immediately after high school to complete his bachelor's degree (UG.GRO). Went to stay abroad for his minor, returned to live in Groningen while commuting to Leeuwarden for his postgraduate program [UG.LEE]. Considers himself 'not a stayer, but also not a goer'. Regional returner, home village leaver
Anke Age 27 Female	Hattem	Hattem	Grew up in smaller city in the North Netherlands. Moved to Nijmegen to do two years of a bachelor's program. Dropped out and went to Groningen to do a bachelor's in archeology [UG.GRO]. Traveled abroad in relation to studies. Moved back to the home city together with boyfriend. Commuted to Leeuwarden for her postgraduate program [UG.LEE]. Considers herself a returner to her home city and home region. Would prefer to live abroad for a job in the future
Jonne Age 24 Female	Roderwolde	Groningen	Grew up in small village outside of Groningen. Went to New Zealand for a year after high school to work. Moved to Nijmegen to complete her bachelor's degree [U.RAD]. Lived in Groningen while commuting to her postgraduate program in Leeuwarden [UG.LEE]. Would like to work in the northern regions in the future. Considers herself a returner to the region but leaver from her village. Wants to live outside of Groningen but still in the region
Lara Age 23 Female	Beetgumermolen	Groningen	Grew up in a small village outside of Leeuwarden. Moved to Groningen after high school. Dropped out after three months and returned to her parental home. Moved out of the parental home to live in Groningen for her bachelor's and postgraduate programs [UG.GRO]. Wants to move to a bigger city after graduating, but may return the countryside or a smaller village in the future. Regional stayer, village leaver
Geert Age 22 Male	Grotegast	Groningen	Grew up in village in the North Netherlands. Lived in parental home for six months before moving to Groningen while doing his bachelor's and postgraduate programs [UG.GRO]. Considers himself 'definitely a leaver' from his home village but a regional stayer
Anouk Age 23 Female	Enschede	Groningen	Grew up in a smaller city in the North Netherlands. Moved into shared house in Groningen while completing her bachelor's degree [UG.GRO]. Moved back to home city to work for two years between bachelor's and postgraduate programs. Moved back to Groningen and commuted to postgraduate program in Leeuwarden [UG.LEE]. Considers herself a returner to the home city but stayer in the region. Would prefer to settle down in home city but also would consider Amsterdam
Sanne Age 27 Female	Marrum, Drachten	Groningen	Grew up in village in the North Netherlands. Moved to Groningen to complete her bachelor's degree [UG.GRO]. Traveled abroad between her bachelor's program and her postgraduate program. New Zealand, Australia, The Fiji Islands. Moved back to Groningen for her postgraduate program [UG.GRO]. Moved to Enschede for one year for an internship at a hospital in the city. Moved back to Groningen to finish her postgraduate program and started her second postgraduate program [UG.GRO]. Considers herself a stayer in the home region. Would prefer to find a job in the northern regions in the future
Felix Age 25 Male	Almelo, Harbrinkhoek	Groningen	Grew up in smaller city in the North Netherlands. Traveled together with family before high school. Stayed in his parental home while doing his bachelor's in Deventer [SAX]. Went to work and travel abroad after bachelor's, US and South America. Moved to Groningen for a postgraduate program [UG.GRO]. Would prefer to stay in Groningen in the future. Considers himself a leaver from his home village
Joost Age 25 Male	Harlingen	Harlingen	Grew up in village in the North Netherlands. Went to Amsterdam immediately after high school. Decided to drop out of bachelor's program and work the rest of the year. Began his bachelor's program again in Amsterdam [UvA]. Applied for postgraduate program in

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

No.	Grew up in	Now lives in	Mobility biography and self-narratives
			Groningen but did not get in. Moved to Brussels and took courses in Amsterdam. Enrolled in a new postgraduate program and commuted [UG.GRO] while living in home village in northern regions. Identifies as a returner to his home region and to his home village. Would move for a job but would prefer a job in the Groningen region
Klara Age 25 Female	Bellinge	Esbjerg	Did her bachelor's in Odense [SDU.OD] while commuting from a small village in Odense. Ended up finding an apartment in Odense during her bachelor's program. Completed a minor at a university in Germany and finished her bachelor's program. Moved to Esbjerg when she began her postgraduate program [SDU.EB]. Identifies as having left her home region psychically but not mentally. Identifies as having stayed in the region but not in the home village. Considers staying in Esbjerg. Would also stay in the region in the future. Would prefer a job in her home village
Sofie Age 25 Female	Hejnsvig	Esbjerg	Grew up in small village in Southwest Denmark. Did HF in a smaller city in the region. After high school, she worked in a local company and went abroad, Guatemala, to do volunteer work. Moved into an apartment in a house in Esbjerg while doing her bachelor's program [SDU.EB] and postgraduate program [SDU.EB]. Moved around in Esbjerg. Commuted to Odense for an internship and a student job twice per week. Considers herself a stayer in her home region but a leaver from her home village
Niels Age 25 Male	Krompt	Esbjerg	Grew up in small village in Southwest Denmark. Took a gap year after high school to work. Spent two months in Romania doing volunteer work. Went to Odense to do his bachelor's degree [SDU.OD]. Lived in a dorm room. Moved back to postgraduate program [SDU.EB] in Esbjerg. Identifies as a returner to the region but not a returner to his home village. Would prefer to stay in the region in the future
Peter Age 25 Male	Odense	Esbjerg	Grew up in a suburb in Odense. Had a gap year before high school. Moved to Esbjerg at the beginning of his bachelor's [SDU.EB]. Ended up instead taking two semesters in Australia before returning to Esbjerg for his postgraduate program [SDU.EB]. Would prefer to stay in the region but move closer to home city. Identifies as a counter mover. Identifies as a leaver from his home city.
Rune Age 30 Male	Esbjerg	Esbjerg	Grew up in the city of Esbjerg. Took VUC after primary school, became a blacksmith and spent seven or eight years working internationally. Returned to Esbjerg frequently, kept an apartment for the entire period in Esbjerg. Also had an apartment in Copenhagen for a short period. Returned to Esbjerg to do a HF and his bachelor's [SDU.EB] and postgraduate programs [SDU.EB]. Would prefer home region or home city because both of their families are in the region. Identifies as a returner to his home region and home city
Carina Age 22 Female	Odense	Esbjerg	Grew up village/suburb of Odense. Moved to Esbjerg immediately after high school to do her bachelor's [SDU.EB] and postgraduate programs [SDU.EB]. Considers herself a counter mover/leaver. Considers herself as having a home in both Esbjerg and Odense. Would prefer to stay in the home region in the future, but it depends on the job market
Maria Age 23 Female	Esbjerg	Esbjerg	Grew up in Esbjerg and lived in the city throughout her entire education. Did her bachelor's [SDU.EB] and postgraduate programs [SDU.EB] in Esbjerg. Lived in a dorm room alone during bachelor's, moved in with boyfriend during postgraduate. Internship at local company in Esbjerg. Considers herself a stayer in the home region and home city. Considers jobs at a commuting distance from her home
Isabella Age 37 Female	Sønder Vistrup	Haderslev	Grew up in a smaller village in the Southwest Denmark. Moved to Kolding together with boyfriend to do her bachelor's [SDU.KO]. Dropped out after three months. Found a job in the municipality. Completed a bachelor's in public administration [UC.EB]. Moved to Copenhagen to work. Lived for several years in Copenhagen. Divorced and moved back to home city with two children. Commuted to

Table 1. Continued.

No.	Grew up in	Now lives in	Mobility biography and self-narratives
			Esbjerg for her postgraduate program [SDU.EB]. Wants to stay in the region in the future. Considers herself a returner to her home region and returner to her home city.
Anton Age 25 Male	Bramming	Esbjerg	Grew up in small village in southwest Denmark. Moved to Esbjerg to do his bachelor's [AAU.EB] after having lived in parental home for the first year of his bachelor's program. Moved to Esbjerg and did his postgraduate program [AAU.EB]. Feels attached to home village but considers himself a leaver from it. Wants to find a job in the area
Lars Age 43 Male	Esbjerg	Esbjerg	Grew up in the city of Esbjerg. Worked before beginning his bachelor's. Lived in Esbjerg while doing his bachelor's [AAU.EB] and postgraduate programs [AAU.EB] Considers himself a stayer in home region and home city
Morten Age X Male	Grindsted	Esbjerg	Grew up in the countryside near a small village in southwest Denmark. Moved to Esbjerg to do his bachelor's [AAU.EB]. Chose Esbjerg because it was the nearest. Worked for two years after graduating with his bachelor's degree and then returned to the university for his postgraduate program [AAU.EB]. Lives together with his girlfriend in a house in Esbjerg. Considers himself a leaver from his home village. Aims for a job in the region; would prefer a job within a one-hour commute

1. 'Regional stayers' (13/20), which is 'Local stayers', 'Local leavers' or 'Local returners' who *stayed in the nearby peripheral region* after having left their local place of origin (either the northern Netherlands or the southwestern region of Denmark),
2. 'Regional returners' (6/18), which is 'Local leavers' or 'Local returners' who *returned to the peripheral region or their home locality/village/city* after having temporarily lived somewhere else, either in another region in the country or abroad, and
3. 'Regional leavers' (1/18), which is 'Local leavers' or 'Local returners' who *left the peripheral region* and did not return.

4.2. Balancing the mobility imperative

Even though all participants related their personal narratives to elements of the mobility imperative as described by Farrugia (2016), the analysis of the interviews revealed how the imperative was contested, 'balanced' and re-imagined by the young adults. The participants – as well as their social relations – perceived 'staying'/being immobile as something undesirable and linked it to negative connotations. However, they simultaneously expressed relational narratives of staying attached to friends or family and returning to the peripheral region in the future. This balancing act was clearly apparent in Maria, a 23-year-old woman in Esbjerg, who expressed in detail how much she struggled with making the decision to stay in Esbjerg. She described her awareness that residential mobility in the form of 'having been somewhere else' would have looked good on her CV. Her reason for considering transferring for education in another city was

> … in order not to be that person that has just done everything in Esbjerg, born and raised, with all my education done here (Maria, age 23, Esbjerg)

This was a typical framing of 'staying' as an identification the participants attempted to avoid. They referred to themselves as 'leavers' in contrast, for instance, to their high school

peers who had remained in the home village. Eight of the participants additionally mentioned how they were influenced by their social relations' perceptions on 'staying behavior', as positioned in opposition to 'leaving' behavior, which was identified as essential for 'becoming' (Worth 2009) an adult. For Maria her supervisor had persistently tried to convince her to leave Esbjerg:

> The reason why I wanted to go to Odense was I that I wanted to challenge myself, and the other thing was that I wanted to look better on my, what is it called, CV? … To just have tried something different. I talked to my supervisor in my bachelor's XX from here […] he tried to convince me to go to Aarhus […] He was like, 'You are not doing it here!' (Maria, age 23, Esbjerg)

This in an example of how of residential mobility was highly encouraged by the respondents' social network. Several of the participants additionally related their motivation to leave to the desire to develop their career, experiencing youth culture in an urban city and a desire for having more opportunities in terms of jobs and cultural experiences, than the area in which they grew up in offered them. This was also reflected in the story of Jonne, a 24-year-old woman in Groningen. Like other participants, she described how the cosmopolitan lifestyle was idealized among herself and her peers:

> Like seeing friends living in all these amazing places and just seeing the good parts of living in a big city, that really appealed to me. 'Oh, you're just living in this center of Amsterdam, that's so cool!' […] You also see media, like social media too, that you just see (…) and it all sounds so perfect. Like, the ideal, like they have accomplished the ideal (Jonne, age 24, Groningen)

Jonne explained that she needed to find a way to justify her choice of remaining in the peripheral region near the village she grew up in. She explained how she used her social relations to help her re-imagine the choice of returning to the region while also escaping the social stigma of being 'a loser' by choosing the peripheral region.

> Yeah, I really had to take my time to really realize what I wanted and not the general idea about, 'Yeah, you move to the big city and then that's where are you going to make it' […] but then I thought 'Yeah, of course it's a legitimate reason just to stay here, and you are not a loser if you do so'. So, it took me some processes of understanding or just realizing that it isn't … its legitimate to stay here if you like it. (Jonne, age 24, Groningen)

The respondents expressed a high amount of ambivalence in relation to negotiating with the expectations of the mobility imperative. They expressed feelings of needing to balance between wanting to be mobile and thereby making the transition into adulthood but still remaining in the nearby region during their higher education. Most of them wanted to both experience the urban life while still maintaining a relationship with the people and the place in their home locality through everyday mobility (c.f. Finn and Holton 2019b). It was evident in the interviews that the peripheral region ranked low in student life parameters and that the peripheral places did not match their image of 'student life' and the possibilities for 'self-fulfillment' and 'development' that they desired from their higher education. However, it this balancing act with the mobility imperative seemed to offer a new perspective to the young adults' relationship with the peripheral place without social stigma.

4.3. Obtaining symbolic mobility capital and re-imagination of the peripheral region

Mobility, as an opportunity for self-development, self-growth (Cuzzocrea 2018) and developing personal qualities (Holdsworth 2006), played a major role in how the participants in our study chose to narrate their residential mobility choices. Even though the residential mobility biographies of our participants varied in distance, frequency and duration, the narratives of 'leaving' were constructed in similar ways. The participants perceived their place of origin as a place that did not offer them possibilities for identity transformation; instead, they emphasized and re-imagined experienced of having traveled the world (with or without family), living or studying abroad or having done minors or internships in other countries as ways of transforming themselves or transforming their view of the peripheral location and their social relations there. The analysis showed that the distance, frequency or duration of the stay received less attention than the narratives of change and self-development. This was expressed in many of the interviews in this study and was particularly exemplified in the interviews with Rune, a 30-year old male from Esbjerg, and Joost, a 25-year-old male from Groningen. Both participants had chosen to return to their home town in the peripheral region after spending time in the metropolitan regions of their countries. Both participants felt like they had made an untraditional choice by moving back to the peripheral location. When asked why he had chosen to return to Esbjerg, Rune answered,

> Well, essentially I just felt that I've had a lot of experiences that really kind of made me look at my home city in a different way […]. I've lived in Japan for about 11 months, and I've lived in Beijing […] I'm not, like, I don't hate Copenhagen, but I thought … We kind of weighed everything together, and I thought about how my life would be here as opposed to going to Copenhagen. (Rune, age 30, Esbjerg)

This is a good example of how the participants in the study re-imagine their relationship to their peripheral home region through their narrative of 'leaving' and having lived somewhere else. Rune framed his experience abroad as something transformative, and 'leaving' became a way for Rune to reevaluate his home region. For Rune, the choice of returning was justified through the experience of being away and experiencing other places to be able to appreciate his hometown. This type of re-evaluation was evident in most of the interviews. Many of the interviewees narrated their residential mobility experience in such a way which made room for changes in the relationship between their own identity and preferences and what they perceived that their home region offered. This was similarly visible in the story from Joost in the Dutch context. When asked why he returned to the region for his postgraduate program, he answered,

> We went to Amsterdam as the only two from our class […] So, we wanted to get out of our own bubble. […] You really want to integrate into the big town, because you're not that former boy anymore […] and that also gets you a sense of who yourself are, because at a certain moment, I felt, now I'm not who I want to be. So, I started to get back to those Friesian roots, in a sense. And I think that gives you more insight in who you are. (Joost, age 25, Groningen)

Both participants imagine their residential mobility as a way of obtaining a new perspective on what the peripheral locality might offer them. It was evident in the interviews

that the mobility experience had symbolic value in itself and was used by the participants as a tool for obtaining the qualities necessary for successful adulthood (Haartsen and Thissen 2014) and to renegotiate the relation to place. For our participants, residential mobility offered an opportunity for narrating elements of transitioning to adulthood, such as detachment from the home locality and identity development. An important finding was that the positive qualities obtained through residential mobility were part of a more or less deliberate strategy of returning to the home region – not necessarily the specific village, but at least the nearby region. Niels, a 25-year-old male from Esbjerg, explained this as follows:

> It was always meant to be a temporary thing […] I never planned to live there [i.e. Odense]. Not saying that it wasn't nice. It was really nice, but I always knew that I would at least try to live around this area […] (Niels, age 25, Esbjerg)

Thus, tracing the narratives of the mobility experiences showed that notions of 'leaving' were often intertwined with narratives of returning. Furthermore, the specific mobility experience, for instance, of moving back to the home region after having lived somewhere else was repeatedly connected to the participants' previous residential mobility biography. Whereas the mobility biographies varied across a continuum, with short-distance mobility experiences at one end and long-distance mobility experiences at the other, the narratives remained similar. In other words, young adults narrate their mobility experience in a way which makes it possible for them to re-imagine their relationship with the peripheral home region. Moving away from the local village while staying in the peripheral region at a nearby university can be instrumental in the process of avoiding association with the negative connotation of being a stayer in a peripheral region. In the words of Jan, a 25-year-old man in Groningen, who reflected on his ambivalence in relation to being a local leaver while simultaneously feeling a strong sense of belonging to the region in general:

> It just feels good being here, but like, I didn't consider myself a stayer [long pause, thinking]; also not a go-er (Jan, age 25, Groningen)

This quote sums up our respondents' narratives of leaving as process where leaving might mean staying and returning on other geographical scales. By exploring the respondents' narratives of leaving, we suggest that mobility experiences of young adults can be interpreted as building so-called 'symbolic mobility capital'. We define this form of capital as something that is obtained through narratives of being a mobile individual – regardless of the destination or duration of the actual mobility experience – and that this capital can be utilized in order to re-interpret the young adults' relationship peripheral region. We call this 'symbolic mobility capital' because it seems to be of high importance for young adults who decides to stay nearby or return to the peripheral region who aim to escape the stigmatization of the place where they grew up. Returning to the quote above from Jan, he builds symbolic mobility capital *by leaving* his local village and staying abroad for a year, which he re-imagines in his identity narratives as a way for him to be able appreciate returning to the region near his village, and thus also 'not being a go'er'. Symbolic mobility capital consists of various kinds of experiences that can provide the elements that are essential to the transition to adulthood which are similar to the elements in Farrugia's mobility imperatives this experiencing a

cosmopolitan lifestyle; detaching from the home location; experiencing the world; developing identity; and self-fulfillment. However, it seems that for our respondents, symbolic mobility capital is a part of a much broader picture where this form of symbolic capital can be used in a re-imagination of the relationship with peripheral home region. The mobility imperative thus only explains part of young adults' mobility behavior, mostly from the perspective of young adults' residential mobility choices as one-off events. While most youth mobility literature builds on the mobility imperative, we find that the residential mobility patterns of young adults in peripheral regions in relation to higher education need to be viewed in a broader timeframe rather than only as a one-time event of leaving the parental home and attending a university because staying, leaving and returning seem to occur multiple times during higher education. While they actively identify as not being 'stayers', our participants to actively use 'leaving' to renegotiate their relationship to the peripheral regions. In the narratives of our participants, the positive connotations attached to the 'local' (stability, family, community, safety, 'closeness') becomes a relevant argument for staying or returning to the region only after having obtained symbolic mobility capital. Before residential mobility, the peripheral place is associated with dullness and a lack of possibilities. After 'having left' for a while, the qualities transform and become attractive again in accordance with the values our participants associate with successful adulthood. In other words, having high symbolic mobility capital mitigates the possible stigma of returning to or staying in the peripheral region.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to understand how young adults who are engaged in higher education in their peripheral home region re-imagine 'leaving' in relation to their choice of staying in or returning to their peripheral home region. We analyzed in-depth interviews with 20 master's students with a wide range of mobility backgrounds who had all chosen to pursue their master's degree in the region where they grew up. Similar to other studies, we found that being a geographically mobile individual has become an increasingly important identity trait for young adults, especially for those engaged in higher education (Finn and Holton 2019c; Grabowski et al. 2017; Holdsworth 2009; Holton 2015). We contribute to the literature by showing how young adults re-imagine narratives of 'leaving' to build what we call symbolic mobility capital: narratives of being mobile persons to showcase their transition into what they perceive as successful adults. This symbolic mobility capital enables them to return to or stay in a peripheral region without the social stigma of staying. While symbolic capital seems to be highly relevant when our respondents interact with their close social relations in the form of friends and family, future research might explore if having symbolic mobility capital relates to other forms of economic or social capital.

We found that young adults balance the mobility imperative by simultaneously identifying as stayers in the home *region* while identifying as local leavers from their home *village*. This distinction between the local and the regional proves to be instrumental in the process of staying attached to the home region while fulfilling the mobility imperative and thereby escaping the stigma of being a local stayer. In this process, the mobility experiences during higher education proved to be of high importance because of what we call 'symbolic mobility capital'. By obtaining this form of capital through mobility

experiences (regardless of the destination or duration) while 'going to university' (Finn and Holton 2019b; Holdsworth 2009) in higher education institutions located in peripheral regions (Thuesen, Mærsk, and Randløv 2020), young adults seem to be able to renegotiate their relationship with the peripheral region. Thus, while staying in a peripheral region is perceived as unfavorable and a socially unacceptable choice for young adults who wants to progress in life, research needs to move beyond this staying/leaving binary (Haartsen and Thissen 2014; Hjälm 2014). Young adults renegotiate their relationship to the peripheral region by obtaining symbolic mobility capital through 'leaving', for instance, in the form of moving away from their home village to the nearest university town in the region. In this way, the social stigma of being a local stayer can be prevented while remaining 'nearby' in the often stigmatized peripheral region. We suggest that obtaining symbolic mobility capital related to residential mobility during higher education mediates the negative connotations of staying in or returning to peripheral regions for young adults.

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