

# ► Project *brief*

Thünen Institute of Rural Studies

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## Living, staying, and social relations in rural areas

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- **There are persistent clichés about living, staying and social relationships in rural areas.**
- **People who live in rural areas often reflect on their decision to stay there.**
- **Staying in rural areas is a process influenced by life history, social relationships, and current individual circumstances.**
- **Everyday life in rural areas is shaped by references to urban areas.**
- **The social relations in villages and small towns can be perceived both positively as support and negatively connoted as social control.**

There are persistent clichés about living and staying in rural areas. One reason for this is that we know too little about the everyday lives and lifestyles of rural residents. The research project "Wohnen in ländlichen Räumen" (Living in Rural Areas) conducted qualitative interviews with residents of villages and small towns on these issues.

### Background and aims

In the public perception, the processes associated with modernization, such as the acceleration of everyday life, the flexibilization of the work world, and increasing spatial and social mobility, do not seem to affect urban and rural areas equally. Thus, on the one hand, there is talk of growing, economically strong, metropolitan centers, while on the other hand, structurally weak, often rural regions, which are confronted with problems such as population decline, aging and selective migration of young, well-educated people, shape public discourses.

In such discourses, life in the big city is associated with a high degree of dynamism, cosmopolitanism and agility, so that people who leave rural areas and move to urban centers conform to the usual notions of modernization. Rural lifestyles, on the other hand, are associated with coziness and village community, but also with sticking to established structures or even stagnation. Those people who consciously decide to stay in rural areas are accordingly assumed to have a traditional lifestyle.

From our point of view, however, social modernization processes do not only take place in centers of urban life, but also in peripheral, rural regions. For example, the change in the work world demands an increased willingness to repeatedly change one's place of residence for one's job or to take on long commuting distances - also for inhabitants of rural areas. Therefore, the research project was dedicated to investigate living and staying as well as social relations in rural areas in a changing society.

### Approach

Between 2018 and 2020, more than 20 qualitative narrative interviews, some of them lasting several hours, were conducted with residents of rural and small-town areas in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. These people were interviewed about their everyday life, their social relationships, their spatial and social positioning in villages and small towns, their connections to large cities, and also about their decision to remain in rural areas.

### Key findings

Our analyses show the following key findings:

#### **There are different forms of staying.**

Most of the people we spoke with are aware that there have been strong emigration movements from peripheral rural areas, especially in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, and that some social and political discourses problematize staying in rural areas and imply a certain backwardness of the residents there. Against this background, the residents deal with the issue of staying and partly see themselves under pressure to justify their actions. In our analysis, we find different lifestyles of staying, ranging from a very critical attitude towards staying, which is connected with the unrealized or unrealizable desire to leave, to the critical-positive discussion of life in rural areas, which is ultimately seen as a conditional factor of one's own well-being, to an unspoken matter-of-course to stay in the village or small town in which one lives.

#### **Staying is not static but a process.**

For the respondents, staying in rural and small-town areas is not an "easy" or "more convenient" alternative to moving to urban centers. The decision-making process is conditional and is negotiated (1) against the background of life and family history, for example, if a family business is to be continued, (2) dependent on other people, for example, if intergenerational solidarity and care obligations are involved, (3) context-bound, i.e., whether

someone stays also depends on the current, individual situation, for example, with regard to the employment situation and partnership status.

### Rural residents refer to urban spaces

The study also makes clear that urban spaces play an essential role for staying in rural and small-town areas. References to urban spaces become relevant when the own current relevant spaces of stayers are constructed. People who have always lived in rural and small-town areas do not construct a relevant territorial space related to themselves between the town entrance and exit signs; rather, urban areas play a relevant role, for example, as a shopping and leisure opportunity, for establishing and maintaining social relationships, or in connection with paid employment.

### "The village community": social relations at the place of residence

Stereotypes and normatively charged ideas also persist about social relations in rural areas especially those in smaller settlements. They often refer to the so-called village community and often assume a homogeneous social space of this settlement type. Our analysis shows, however, that the personal closeness, high social integration, mutual familiarity and community attributed to rural areas are not given per se - the social relations are permanently established under local-specific conditions in an ongoing process by the respective inhabitants.

According to the plurality of biographies, life situations and designs of the residents, the village community or the social relationships at the place of residence also have different meanings

for the everyday life of the respective persons: The desire for encounter and distance varies. A mutual regard for each other can be expressed both in positively perceived support services and in negatively connoted social control. Likewise, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, social inequality and lines of conflict have an impact on local interactions and co-existence.

### Further research needed

Following the project, it is important to conceptually condense the dimensions and characteristics of individual categories, for example in the typology of lifestyles of staying, by adding further contrasting cases, e.g. people from central-urban areas, young people or senior citizens. It is to be examined whether the established dimensions of staying can also be found in this way in the specific groups.

It is also questionable to what extent the lifestyles of staying highlighted here also apply to urban staying and whether rural areas (e.g. as an idyllic place of longing) are just as relevant for the inhabitants.

Against the background of a network analytical perspective, the social dimension of staying in rural and small-town areas is particularly interesting. Finally, the analysis has shown that the basis of the decision to stay is also experience-based narratives of third parties, therefore family members, friends and acquaintances are important sources of information. The question is, who is involved in the decision-making process of staying and how, and can patterns of social networks be identified with regard to the different ways of staying?

## Weitere Informationen

### Contact

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<https://www.thuenen.de/de/tr/projekte/wohnen-in-laendlichen-raeumen/>

### Project duration

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### Partner

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### Projekt-ID

2139

### Publications

Schiemann S, Rühmling M, Klärner, A (2022) Die Dorfgemeinschaft: (In)Begriff sozialer Nähe und gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalts? In: Belina B et al. (Hrsg.): Ungleiche ländliche Entwicklung (S. 387-403). Bielefeld: transcript.

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Rühmling M, Schieman S (2019) Da! Gebliene! Alltagsarrangements in ländlichen Räumen. Wissen Schafft Demokratie 5: 16 27.

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