Career choice and counselling in rural northern Norway

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'…I've been talking about this all the time: if you get the chance, come home! I'll be old someday, and then I'd like someone to be here and take care of me.'

- The counsellor.

Rurality and career choices. This article explores how teenagers from a small rural community in northern Norway experience making career choices, in the intersection between individual needs and community values. Interviews with 10th graders in the process of making their first manifest career choice – choosing upper secondary – shows that whether or not the teenagers identify with the community and see a future there or not, is of major importance. The consequential preference for education and acquisition of competence, either strengthen or weaken the ties with the community, becoming a determinant of who leaves, and who stays.

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Introduction

It is a two-hour drive into the country from the nearest city to get there, on roads following winding fjords and valleys, through smaller settlements, villages and lush scenery. Travellers have to pass over heathery mountain passes where the harsh winter weather can close the road for days at a time. Unsurprisingly career opportunities within this community are restricted, being mainly based on agriculture, small craft industries and jobs in the municipality.

It is a small community. The number of people has decreased by a third in one generation, from 1542 in 1987 to 1043 in 2017 (Statistics_Norway, 2017). There are numerous reasons for the depopulation of this community, but it reflects the unresolved issues with balancing centralization and decentralization. Since the

1960s, the population in rural areas has been in steady decline, especially in the northern areas (Båtevik, 2013, Lysgård, 2013).

The need to secure the community's future is a considerable theme within the community, and the career counsellor – as the one guiding the community's teenagers towards their future – feels a responsibility to give them reasons to stay, while at the same time encouraging them to express their individuality. The teenagers feel the implicit tension when they make their choices for the future, and in this article, I explore how they experience and address this tension and suggest some implications for career guidance.

The Norwegian education system

Education has a high priority in Norway. The government has stated that the completion of upper secondary education is the foundation for a beneficial and lasting connection to working life (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2002). One of the main tasks of the education system is to ensure that young people have the best prospects of becoming self-sufficient and well-adapted adults. However, the reality of geography can often frustrate the ambition to follow education trajectories for young people in rural areas.

The Norwegian school system is based on three levels of local, regional and national/state governance. All municipalities in Norway offer compulsory school from year 6 to 16 and counties are responsible for the three-year academic or four-year vocational upper

secondary phase. However, the upper secondary provision requires a community to have a sufficient population to sustain diverse educational programs (Mathiesen, Mordal and Buland, 2014). This means that while some places can offer young people a wide range of upper secondary choices, others offer more limited choices and in communities like the one in this case study there are no upper secondary choices available. For students from small communities without upper secondary provision, continuing with education means moving away from home at 16 or travelling great distances to attend their preferred program. This system is part of the reason for migration in Norway, perpetuated by the fact that higher education institutions and employment opportunities are more likely to be found in central, urban areas. As Lysgård (2013) sums up, the two main forces behind the urbanization process in Norway are employment and education, so 'the rural-urban migration is not caused by a widespread wish to live in urban areas' (p. 283).

Individualism and the urban/ rural divide

The counsellor based at the local school supports the teenagers in their choice of, and transition to, upper secondary provision. His job is to help them to become aware of their own interests, abilities and values, and gain knowledge, self-knowledge and the ability to themselves make vocational and educational choices (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). In research on cultural differences, Norway is considered an individualistic society (Hofstede, 2001), so it is unsurprising that career counselling within the country is typically informed by a focus on the individual.

Individualism is associated with a situation where possibilities and resources are plentiful, and where individual action and independent choices do not affect others that much. Conversely, interdependence and the inclination to consider the interests of the group before your own are values central to collectivism. This value-set often characterises settings where possibilities and resources are not plentiful, and relying on others is key (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, Lucca, Sarason, 1988). This is one of the reasons why collectivism and rurality are often associated,

and consequently, an assumption may well be that there are cultural differences between urban and rural Norway. As Lysgård (2013) also points out, the urban-rural discourse in Norway has been marked by conflict, denoting such a difference.

Although there is a perceived 'divide' between urban and rural Norway, Norwegian researchers (i.e. Villa, 2000, Berg, 2007) argue that thinking heterogeneously or dichotomously about urban and rural life in Norway disguises the structural and cultural similarities between urban and rural life. These similarities are brought on by societal developments based on policies emphasizing equity and egalitarian values, like welfare and education for all. However, international research has shown that a rural background can have profound implications for career choice and development. Corbett (2007) showed that for young people in rural areas, making choices about education is in effect about choosing to stay or leave their home community. In the community he studied, the academic skills acquired from schooling had little relevance where practical, physical labour was the common denominator in the jobs available. Building on Corbett, Alexander and Hooley (2018) argue that geography and attachment to place are important in the career decision-making process. Specifically, the feeling of belonging to a place or community means that the choice to leave to pursue education elsewhere is laden with feelings of loss of identity. Alexander (2016) has pointed out, that the pull of 'home' remains strong for some people with a rural background and that many choose to return to their home communities after having been away to get educated, even though this is likely to limit their salaries and employment choices.

Collective individualism

Places are complex. They are not simply geographical but are also social. While many people with rural backgrounds miss the physical spaces, they also miss the people who live there, the interconnectedness, the shared past and the common future. These issues of place and social connection call into question an exclusive focus on individuals' career and life trajectories in career guidance. However, the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism is not always straightforward. While careers work

typically emphasizes self-actualization (Maslow, 1971) it is also possible to understand this concept in relation to *others*. To self-actualise can be about emphasising and realising relationships with others, rather than accentuating individuality.

Some researchers argue that while Norwegian culture is individualistic it is also collectivistic. The term *collectivistic individualism* coined by Hernes and Hippe (2007) tries to explain how it is possible to develop structures and systems that combine meeting individual needs while at the same time protecting and developing community values and the common good. Even though it is expensive, making contributions to a common system that regulates sick pay, maternity leave and other welfare elements, expands individual possibilities. It is possible to argue that collectivistic individualism is learned, first indirectly through education and social storytelling, and later through directly experiencing the dynamic between obligation and privilege, acquiring taxable income and thus being able to benefit from the system.

While contributing to the system can be seen as an act of collectivism, the choice of *how to become* a contributor to that system through your career and *what kind* of contribution that should be (what educational and career route you should choose), is typically seen as an individual one. Norwegians are thus experienced in resolving the tensions between individualistic and collectivistic perspectives. Yet, this can also be experienced as a tension and a pressure. Career choice is a process of identity formation for the individual, but the choice of education and vocation is a matter of interest for the community. For example, the question the teenagers in this study constantly get from their co-dwellers is this: *will you come back and provide some continuity in this community, once you are educated?*

The main question in this article is how do the teenagers in this case study experience this tension, and on what basis do they make their decision to stay – or leave?

About the study

This article is based on interviews with seven students and one counsellor about the process of making career choices in a rural community in northern Norway. This case was chosen because these interviews can contribute to the understanding of how context has an impact on social processes (Hartley, 2004).

The interviews were semi-structured conversations, in one group interview with seven of eight students in the only 10th grade class in this community, and in subsequent individual interviews with two of the students and the school counsellor/teacher. The main topic of the conversations was the experience of making upper secondary choices and what they thought was challenging about making career choices in their community.

In the first step of the analysis, I coded the interviews using codes generated from the material and made them as generic and open as possible. The interviews were further analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Larkin and Thompson, 2011). I employed a strategy from IPA where I read the content of every node, interpreting and synthesizing the content to clarify common meanings in the statements and suggest psychological and theoretical concepts related to them. The next step of the thematic analysis was finding overall themes. I tried several different groupings, and found that separating the nodes into two overall groups, 'Context' and 'Competence' with subgroups fitted the material best.

Findings and discussion

Layered decision making

The decision making of the young people in the study can be described as complex and layered. The metaphor of 'layers' is useful as it shows how different factors are of different importance when decisions about the future are to be made. Their relative importance is an effect of the proximity to the young person's core – that deep place where individuality has its origin, and where true decisions are made. When asked about whether they feel that what goes on in their community is important in their decision-making, a girl in the group states: 'It concerns me, but it doesn't influence me', implying that what goes on around her is important, but not relevant for her decision.

For the teenagers, the influences that are closest to their core, such as responsibilities, the family, peers, the closest relations and the farm or small town-identity, are the most important factors in the decision-making process:

> …I think those growing up, who has got allodial rights[1], yeah you see, they like inherit the farm, I think it's more pressure for them to come back, not pressure like coming back to the community, but pressure to come back and run the farm, because it is, if it is to continue within the family.

This girl goes on to say: '… my big brother, he has not thought at all about running any farm, so I guess we'll sell it, and that's not what I want'. Therefore, she is planning to take it over, and become a teacher on the side, as it is necessary to plan for an additional income when becoming a farmer.

The context, both proximal and distant, has push and pull effects which influence the teenagers' decision-making process by reinforcing their choice. For instance, for the teenagers who choose not to come back, the negative sides of the small community work as a push factor. Limited possibilities for employment, conflicts and a general disappointment with the adults in the community make it even less likely that the teenagers will choose to come home:

> I want to come back, a little, because I like it here, but it's this thing with getting a job, in addition to me feeling a bit in a phase of opposition now, against the politicians and all of the…. I think the people here, with these [conflicts and debates]… they do it in a way that doesn't make me want to come back.

In addition, the teenagers feel the weight of their decision in the community.

> Yes, it's a lot of pressure… We had a [career-day] where many people working in the municipality came and presented their vocation, and they all

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1   *Odel* in Norwegian. Allodial lands are the absolute property of their owner and not subject to any rent, service, or acknowledgement to a superior. Hence, allodial title is an alternative to feudal land tenure. Odel, like the word alodium as used in i.e. France, means land held by hereditary right. It is a retroactive right, in some cases still effective even after the farm has been sold.

finished saying: come home, we need you.

Competence

Competence, the ability to do something successfully or efficiently, forms some of the layers in the decision making for these teenagers. The acquisition of competence is a personal process, which can shift a young person from one place to another both mentally and, through career choices and mobility, physically. Competence can be seen as a form of career capital, which can provide both security and possibilities, allowing you to move out of the community and perhaps back again. Thinking about competence – how to get it and what it should be and what needs it should address – is a future-oriented activity. Thinking about competence also means thinking about where you want to go and what you would like to achieve. Competence makes mobility possible:

> …and there's a lot of things to see and experience out in the world. You can work abroad, for instance. Everything is possible, but like my brother, he's not a school-phenomenon, he hasn't finished upper secondary. So it's a real achievement for him to get permanent employment.

The brother is bound to place through the job he has because it will be difficult for him to get another one, as he has no formal qualifications. The boy goes on to say: 'I'll finish school, I will do that, regardless of doing it good or bad, I will finish school.'

Competence and skill is something that binds you and something that sets you free. Competence in the form of education can be abstract and formal, and competence development means following a trajectory in the education and employment system – out of the community. However, competence can also be practical, and when skills are transferred between generations, like farming, making traditional foods or handcraft, it tightens the connections between the teenagers and their community, because practical skills are what are needed and valued here.

> …I mean the griddle cake-bakery, it's a little, you need to be able to make griddle cake and that's like something that grandmothers teach their daughters, and then their daughters, there are like

no sons involved.

The reason for this is that the sons are busy learning other things:

> …many of our parents are pelementmakers[2]… they can do everything. We have a lot of them here, and of course, they don't do any women-stuff.
>
> *Do they say that?*
>
> No, but they are raised on farms so they are not used to it. …they are raised on farms where they need to know a little bit about everything, carpentry, electronics, that kind of thing.

Academic knowledge and schooling are appropriate for a few of the vocations possible in this place, such as teacher, accountant, and municipal administrator. Holders of this kind of skillset or competence represent something different in the community. The counsellor explains:

> That's just the problem, that there is no culture or tradition for [career]. I mean we do have some academics, but we certainly do not have many academics in this community, and the few we've got are living down in the [lower part of the community], in that area because they have their jobs in the technical and public administration. And from [the middle part] and up there are certainly not many people educated beyond upper secondary, that have a higher education, that lives up here. There are a few teachers and a few more, but not many.

When there is no practical reason to stay, no farm or firm to take over, but merely a limited range of possibilities and the danger of not being able to support yourself, then a major push factor is the fear that staying within the community might make it difficult to find a livelihood. In this sense, students absorb the broader Norwegian narrative about the importance of education to employment and act on this above the local community narrative. The

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2   *Pelementmaker* is a word often used in Northern dialects and denotes a person with a multitude of practical skills, a resourceful jack-of-all-trades worker who is highly valued in the community.

many possibilities outside the community and the prospect of 'making it' there, the variety, the freedom, all work as pull factors in a situation where the teenagers do not identify themselves and their future within the community, where limitations and limited opportunities, traditional values and specific mindsets are prominent factors.

Inside/outside

When the teenagers decide that their future lies outside of the community, they focus on the multitude of choices and possibilities that exist in the external, peripheral world. At the same time, the limited range of opportunities in the community reinforces the choice to leave. This is also the case for the locally oriented teenager that would like to remain and build a future in the community, but who does not have a farm or a firm to inherit: 'I would like to come back, but I've got to come back to a job, I don't want to come back here to go NAV-ing [be dependent on welfare].' So in order to provide a livelihood, he will need to adhere to the general advice and knowledge of both teachers and other adults around him, to get educated to ensure employment:

> No I couldn't start working now because I could lose my job, and if I wanted a new job they would say, they would see, no he's not been to school, does not have a certificate of apprenticeship and then they would not be interested in me. I don't think.
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> *Here in the community, or on the outside?*
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> A bit of both, but mostly outside, but a little in here as well. I think they want people with education in all jobs. … You hear it at home too, from everybody really. You hear it at home, and you've heard it so many places that it's an important factor, when it comes to work, as I said, they can see that you achieved something.

That means leaving and staying out, in the peripheral context where the possibilities are to be found, but instead of choosing out of interest and lust for adventure, he makes his choice because he fears that otherwise, he will not be able to build a future for himself.

Identity

Looking at my parents, seeing myself as living on a farm, raising my kids in this traditional culture, is this really who I am? Whether the answer is yes or no, the possibilities for work and providing a livelihood can be found in the context, either within the community or outside it. If there is nothing in the local context which provides a strong clue about career direction, then what to do and when to do it can be an open question:

> Have not at all figured out what I would like to become, so instead of stressing that, I just figure I'm not even sixteen and work is still far off, regarding the choices I need to make – they can wait until I have more information, and know what I want.

The analysis suggests that identification, as well as opportunities, affect decision making in a profound way. In the statement above, a girl who plans to live outside the community says she needs more information, about herself as well. This implies that she cannot find those answers about herself – the answers that identification gives – in her immediate surroundings. Illustrative of this, there is a clear understanding that they, the newer generation, feel that they represent something different from the traditional context of the community: '…We, the younger generation, are much more modern and don't care about [gender] labels, so I'm quite sure it'll change – IF we come home.' But she knows that neither she nor the majority of her fellow teenagers will return to this community, so things are more likely to stay the same. For the ones who do stay, staying means participating in the community and continuing what is there, the farm or the firm. It is also necessary to accept the culture, the values, the gender difference and the more traditional lifestyle – perhaps not adhering to it yourself, but accepting how life is lived in this place.

> I think it probably has got something to do with us living in a rural community, we live a little on the outside, I am not saying that we are old-fashioned or anything, but I still think that it lingers.

Conclusion

The task of choosing what do with your life when you are fifteen is a big one. As the counsellor says: 'They are only kids when they leave here, some of them are not even 16'.

For some of them, being able to stay in their home community is pivotal and they will choose their education and future vocation to be able to do that. For others, the best option is to postpone choice by avoiding the specifics and going for the general academic route that allows them to wait, to get a little older, know themselves a little better, and to see what happens. But, even though they are not yet capable of spelling out what they would like to become, they are actively engaged and clear about what they *do not want to become* – dwellers of their home community. That is just not how they see themselves.

The implications for the educational institutions and career counselling in small, rural places is that understanding how attachment and connection to place, and how this relates to identity, is important for choosing education. In effect, this means that the most important and perhaps the most basic decision they make is about their life-course, and the consequential question is what education fits with that. Although simultaneous in time, they are hierarchical in importance, as the concept of contextual layers of relative importance suggests. For the counsellor and other adults in the community, this implies a different starting point for career conversations. While the concern for the teenagers and the wish to give them the best possible opportunities might make the educational trajectories the most obvious advice, the realisation is that for some the competence acquired must connect to a future in the community. For others, the tension between individual aspirations and community needs is not resolved by exercising pressure to inspire them to return. It could rather inspire them to stay away.

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