

We don't want you to join us if you don't leave us!

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In the transition between school and working life many young people are forced to make decisions which will have major, but difficult-to-foresee, consequences for their futures. For many of them there is an additional decision to make, namely the question of whether they should stay where they have grown up or move somewhere else.

There is a migration of young people from almost every small municipality in Sweden, which is a major concern at several levels of society. Municipal leaders see their population base shrink, and are worried about the change in demographics and how this will affect social welfare. Businesses are worried there will be a shortage of skilled labour. Furthermore, there is the issue of what happens to confidence in the future and opportunities for development in a community where the young people are leaving?

This article discusses the paradox in that underlying norms and internal logic lead to a situation where neither the young people who leave nor those who remain in the region are seen as a force for development. This is despite the fears of the adults in the regions of emigration, and despite there often being an expressed desire from regional policymakers to increase the participation of young people in regional development.

The leave/stay issue isn't new

Research about young people is often inter-disciplinary since youth is a concept which is interesting from several aspects. Migration research has also been carried out within different disciplines and the theoretical and methodological approaches vary. To sum up, it can be said that research into the causes of peoples' decision to migrate can be discerned as a development from theories that emphasize actual, primarily economic, relationships, towards a recognition of relational, social, and cultural factors (see e.g. Ravenstein 1985, Jackson 1986, Tilly 1990, Castles & Miller 2003). In my analysis of young peoples' leaving and staying I find the theoretical sources of inspiration primarily within sociology, cultural sociology, human geography, and gender studies. Within the individual disciplines, different factors are emphasized as essential, and my research approach is that the combination of explanatory factors have much to contribute to the analysis of the migrate/stay problem (Svensson 2006).

When Swedish young people have been studied (see for example Jonsson 1994, Trondman 2001, Johansson 2003) it becomes evident that beyond the underlying factors of class, gender and ethnicity there is also a local/regional aspect. In the question of whether to move or stay there is a clear dividing line between groups, where young people (with otherwise similar backgrounds) behave differently, depending on whether they live in larger cities or if they live in smaller communities.

Major transformations in small Swedish municipalities

I mainly base my study on the experiences and views of young people in Söderhamn, a municipality along the Swedish east coast, in approximately the middle of Sweden, about 270 kilometers north of Stockholm, but I have also made a comparative study in three municipalities in the south of Sweden (Svensson 2012). That study confirms the results from this former study.

Söderhamn can be described as a rather traditional industrial town, based on the forestry industry. The municipality consists of the central town (where around half of the population live) and the surrounding countryside, villages, and smaller industrial communities.

Söderhamn's population has decreased from more than 32,000 in 1975 to around 25 000 in 2012. Because of the industrial restructuring, that has taken place since the mid-70's, Söderhamn and similar municipalities have suffered from a declining population base and a relatively high level of unemployment.

During recent decades Söderhamn has lost several thousand jobs. A number of industries, including sawmills and paper and pulp industries, have closed. The conversion from an industrial society to a post-industrial era has seriously hurt Söderhamn, as in many other municipalities in Sweden. During the 1980's

this loss of employment was compensated to some extent by a major expansion in different areas of public enterprises. When the public sector declined during the early 1990's the crisis broke for municipalities like Söderhamn. The decision to close the F15 Air Force base was for that reason somewhat of a deathblow to the entire region. (SOU 1998:89: 3, my own translation)

In other words, the structure of opportunities has changed to a great degree in recent years and the structural changes in the labour market have drastically reduced the opportunities, for example, to find an industrial employment in Söderhamn. Söderhamn is in a period of transition, in an attempt to move on from its history as an industrial town and re-orient itself towards a "knowledge society".

The development of a region is not a rational forward-moving process with clear paths and goals, but rather something uncertain and in continuous creation. In a municipality like Söderhamn the involvement of the residents in the regional development is essential for what the future of the area will look like. In this context the attitudes of young people to the region have a great symbolic value. The decision of the individual young person to migrate or stay affects the local and regional society. Naturally, knowledge of what can influence people to stay in their home community or to migrate is also of importance for formulating regional policies.

An interactive approach and combined methods

From an interactive research approach, and a combination of several data collection methods, I have tried in different ways to involve myself in the everyday thoughts and actions of young people and adults, and in their reflections concerning themselves and others. Interactive research seeks to combine the demands of both relevance and scientific method, which includes creating a proximity to the reality where new groups are included in the formation of knowledge. What differentiates interactive research from other research is not which data collection methods are used, but rather the opportunity for a common formation of knowledge in equal dialog between the researcher and the participants (Aagard Nilsen & Svensson 2006).

Table 1. Different data collection methods used in the analysis and their contribution to my research

Data collection method	Analysis focus	Main contribution to my research
8 Interviews, 4 boys, 4 girls	Attitudes of individual young people	What do the young people themselves perceive to be important in the stay/move issue? What explanations are given/not given?
Project work in the upper-secondary school	Young peoples' group discussions, 50 pupils surveys other young people.	How do young people in groups discuss their own and others' attitudes to moving or staying? Is it more "correct" to think in a particular way?
60 Essays, upper secondary school	Young peoples' individual reasoning/priorities	Are there differences between different school classes, between genders within and between the groups? What arguments do the young people use regarding their decisions to stay or move?
Joint analysis with the essay-groups	Young peoples' group discussions	Is there peer pressure on this issue? If so, what form does it take? Is it different in different groups? Is there a hierarchy of "better" and "worse" points of view?
Survey (213persons =86% of all pupils in last year of upper secondary)	Survey of an entire year group in the upper-secondary school	Systematised knowledge on the young peoples' attitudes to the home town/big city and the move/stay issues are related to factors such as social background and gender.
Formalised meetings with adults	Adults' group discussion in more official contexts	Adults' official attitude to the various choices facing young people and their explanations of the different choices that young people make.
Informal discussions with adults (and young people)	Adults' views individually and in groups, in more informal contexts	Spontaneous, unconsidered, uncensored reactions and views have provided a range of insights into and knowledge on the everyday understanding of the move/stay problem
Youth conferences	Meeting between adults and young people	How are the wishes of young people and adults regarding the participation of young people met? Discrepancy between rhetoric and action provides clues to dilemmas and ambivalence. The researcher can fulfil a function by clarifying this.

I have studied the experiences and opinions of the young people at an individual level, in the form of interviews, essays, and questionnaires. The results from this data have been discussed and analyzed together with young people in different groupings. I have also studied several different contexts/situations where young peoples' migration/staying is processed in one or another way, by the young people themselves and/or by adults. During my research project I have both followed and taken part in the public discussion concerning young people in the region, and I have followed actions for the participation and influence of children and young people in the municipality (Svensson 2005).

The interactive approach and the various data collection methods I have used have in part addressed different questions and have varied in terms of the focus of the analysis. They have thus together contributed to the results of my research. In table 1, I relate different data collection methods to the primary analysis focus and to the method's main contribution to my research results.

To choose yourself?

The answer of young people to the question of what determines whether they migrate or remain is the self-evident comment "you decide yourself" or "you want such different things", and occasionally "the others don't understand what is best". Their own choices are presented as obvious and "natural" and the different behaviour of others can sometimes be explained by them possibly having been affected by friends and parents.

From the answers to the questionnaires, it is apparent however, that the young people to a great degree share basic values about what is important in life. From the young peoples' own experiences of differences it is perhaps surprising that there aren't greater differences. From the essays you can see that boys facing the future, as a rather homogenous group, focus on their coming work, but the path to get there is different for different groups. The focus of the girls is more diffuse. One group of girls - primarily those in vocational programs in upper secondary school - stress home, family and relationships in their future plans. Another group of girls, primarily those in more academic-oriented programs, focus on new experiences, travel and individual development.

How the young people see their own opportunities to achieve what they want in Söderhamn doesn't seem to be of decisive importance for whether they could imagine staying or migrating. Instead you can see an inverse relationship. It is a majority of middle class young people who see that most opportunities are open to them in Söderhamn, at the same time that it is individuals from this group who to a high degree say that they will leave.

Questions of participation and influence arose early during my research, and many young people complained about a lack of participation and influence when we spoke about the future. The perceptions of the young people on this issue ran counter to the "truth" asserted by many adults, that young people are not interested in local/regional development. The lack of agreement between the perceptions of adults and young people on this issue of course increased my interest in the question.

The questionnaire answers revealed that the *desire* to be able to influence your immediate surroundings is generally evenly shared by the different youth groups, but the young peoples' *belief in their opportunities* to influence differ to a great degree. Working class young people don't believe there is an opportunity to get more involved. They don't know where to turn or whether anyone would be interested in their participation. The boys are angry and frustrated by this, to a greater degree than the girls. The middle class young people have greater confidence in their opportunities to gain influence over societal development, at least when they get older, and if they are prepared to adapt to the political system. Middle class girls also express a hope that the opportunities for influence and participation can be greater somewhere else.

What do the adults think?

Broadly generalized you can say that the working class children have to a higher degree a desire to be able to stay in their home locality, or in its vicinity, and they also perceive this as their parents' wishes. At the same time, these young people say that both they and their parents see the situation realistically and that the foundation of an adult life is that you have a job and can support yourself. And if there aren't jobs in Söderhamn, then you have to look elsewhere, even if that is not what you want.

For the middle class young people the relationship is the opposite. Both they and their parents see future migration as something natural. It is often so obvious that it isn't even discussed specifically, but rather is an underlying given for other discussions. The question of migration for middle class young people often is related to the idea of a college or university education, but far from always. For these parents moving away also seems to have an intrinsic value.

Among the groups of closest friends, the choice seems to be obvious in the same way. You socialize with other young people who look at life and the future in about the same way that you do yourself. *What* the “natural thing” to do in the migrate/stay question is nevertheless different for different young people, on the basis of social background and gender. For that reason the perception of what you as a young person shall/should/wants to do about your future moving or staying differs.

One issue that revealed large differences based on the young peoples’ class backgrounds, was the feeling of being desired/in demand by the local policymakers. On the question of whether they think local politicians want them to remain in the municipality, almost 70 percent of young people with clear middle class backgrounds answered yes. Only around 30 percent of the working class young people answered that question positively.

Table 2. Do you believe that the local politicians want you to stay in Söderhamn?
Proportion (in percent) who answered yes. (Chi²: *=0.05, **=0.01)

	Boys:	Girls:
Working class	28**	31*
Weak middle class connection	40**	31*
Strong middle class connection	69**	67*

The paradox appears even clearer here. The middle class young people - the ones who see the most opportunities in Söderhamn, who feel the most wanted by local politicians and who believe they have the greatest opportunities to influence their situation - are also those who to a great degree are planning to leave the region. Many of them, however, can imagine returning later in life, if the right conditions should arise. The middle class boys, to a much greater degree than the girls, express a desire or will to return when it is time to start a family.

The working class young people - who don't feel wanted by the local politicians and who don't see any particularly great opportunities to influence - would, to a significantly larger degree, like to stay in the region. How can this be explained?

Choose yourself – but choose right!

My study shows that the formation of identity among young people develops in an interchange of several strong (and sometimes conflicting) mechanisms and it strongly confirms the importance of class and gender. (see e.g. Willis 1977, Skeggs 2000) The wishes and hopes of the young people are to a great degree linked to their social backgrounds, but there are differences between boys and girls within the same class.

Based on my study, I believe that different factors don't just add to each other, but rather that there are interactive effects among them which are of importance for the young peoples’ decision-making. Class and gender, as well as the tension between the centre and the periphery, are expressed in the region in different ways. This comes through the various young peoples’ divergent regional attachment; through the different expectations of boys and girls, that is, the regional “gender contract” (Åström & Hirdman 1992), through the different conceptions of normalcy which this gives young people; as well as through the different opportunities for both real choices and for the preferential right of interpretation offered different young people. The relative importance of the different factors have been negotiated and confirmed primarily among the circle of friends and family. All of these factors interact and influence the individual's opportunities for development, values, and horizon of opportunities.

Even if the young people themselves don't expressly identify with their home municipality, I have seen major differences in how rooted young people can be there, above all based on their desires for proximity to family and friends, and in their hopes for the future. In my study, as in others (see for Swedish examples Jonsson 1994, Trondman 2001, Johansson 2003), it becomes clear that the living conditions of working class young people provide them with a base in the home community, while the middle class young people to a greater degree have their sights on “moving on”. They look to the world to find “something more” and “something better”. This difference in attachment to the region is also reflected in which questions interest different groups of young people. The working class young people express a desire to devote time and

interest into more local practical issues, while the middle class young people have a more global and ideological interest in society.

The traditional “gender contract” prevalent in the area results in the expected consequences, where the social rules do not represent a marked problem for the boys. The middle class boys are strongly confident that they will be able to participate in and influence regional social development, at least if/when they return as adults. That is after they have shown that they know where a modern youthful life ought to be lived. The stumbling block for middle class boys is largely “only” the difficulty in finding a sufficiently good job in the region.

For the middle class girls, based on the conclusions they draw from growing up and their expectations for the future, it isn’t as probable that they can achieve what they want in the region. Even if they, as a group, to a relatively large degree believe that the local politicians want them to stay in the municipality, they seem to be sceptical of their opportunities to participate in the regional development. This group of girls places high demands on themselves and on their surroundings. They don’t intend to be satisfied with just anything, but are rather hunting for “the best life”, and they intend to optimize their opportunities to achieve it. The regional “gender contract” is a probable reason for them seeing their lives as far too restricted in their home municipality. They believe there is a lot that has to be changed in the municipality before life there would be optimal, and for that reason many come to the conclusion that their future is not in Söderhamn.

The horizon of opportunity for the working class young people is characterized to a high degree by limited hopes. If you generalize perhaps you can say that they don’t dream of “everything”, but rather hope in any case to get “something”. For the boys, work is an important component which to a great degree determines other priorities, but their attachment to the region is strong and their hopes to be able to stay in the region are clearly expressed. Many of them don’t see that they have anything to win, except perhaps to possibly avoid unemployment, by moving to a large city.

The hopes that the girls with working class backgrounds express about the future are to a great degree about family and relationships, and consequently there is certain flexibility in their thoughts about residence. What is, however, important for these girls is proximity and security, and therefore their home municipality appears to be a good alternative. But for working class girls as well, the threat of unemployment is something that prompts them to consider possible migration. The situation that can be assigned to the local “gender contract” is not cited to any high degree as restrictive by these girls. Instead they seem to know about and to a certain extent accept that there are limited opportunities open to them. The girls who accept/appreciate the traditional women’s role see a future in the region, while it seems as if a desire to find another role leads many girls to want to migrate.

A free choice?

The idea that young people today are “culturally disconnected” (Ziehe 1986) has not been confirmed in my study. On the contrary, my study shows that the desires of the young people to a high degree reflect their social backgrounds. The most prominent aspect is not the reflexive choice, but rather that the young people seem instead to follow a fairly unreflective desire to do “the natural thing”. The norms that exist about how you “should” be as a young person, what is “normal” and “natural”, are connected to class and gender. It seems to be that working class young people and their parents live with the perception that “the natural thing” is that there is employment in the local area and that you should stay there. The perception of the middle class families and middle class young people of “the natural thing” is more in line with the idea of adolescence as an orientation towards the urban and modern. It is therefore “natural” for those who want to be a modern adult to seek the big city.

So what is a free choice based on all these different starting points? That the choice to migrate would be free in the sense that it occurs without external influence, has been contradicted, I believe, by my own and others’ research. My studies, as many others, do not show individualized choices to any great degree.

Can a free decision instead be to realize your desires? The horizon of opportunities of young people can be limited by a number of factors. One of the most essential factors for the opportunities of young people to realize their goals is to have their own livelihood. The desire of the working class young people to be able to stay in the area does not provide particularly high status, nor does it offer particularly bright future prospects. It is more that they are expected to adapt their desires to reality and realize that a future in the area is not possible. It seems as if the experiences of working class young people bring them to believe that “anything is possible” and that it is worthwhile to keep looking for “the very best”, to a much lesser degree than among the middle class. The desire of working class young people to be able to stay in their home locality is perhaps instead about holding on to “something” of the good life. In addition it isn’t obvious that living in a large city means increased opportunities for everyone, it is more likely that the middleclass will make a rising career (Andersson 1996, 2000).

The middle class boys seem to be the ones most assured that there is a place for them both “at home” and “out in the world”, and their choice to go out into the world appears to be relatively uncomplicated. The desire of middle class girls to “move on” is probably based to some degree on a feeling that they don’t fit in their home municipality, but the choice to migrate seems to a great degree to have a positive feeling and be filled with hopes. Seen from this perspective, to have the opportunity to choose what you desire, the choices of middle class young people seem to be freer. They can choose what they desire to be able to choose, and this choice gives them relatively bright future prospects and high social status.

Several researchers (see e.g. Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Furlong & Cartmel 1997) discuss whether the real room for action has increased to the same degree as the thinking of young people – that has been characterized by increasingly broader horizons of opportunity (Ziehe 1986). It isn’t just that young peoples’ experience of personal responsibility for the choices they make have been individualized, but also the responsibility for *the results* of these choices. In a somewhat exaggerated tone you could say that they are free to blame themselves.

Young people - regional development?

In the eyes of middle class adults young people demonstrate their ambition and ability by making the decision “to go out into the world”. Regional policy makers realize that young people are needed for the region’s survival, but, in line with the values and traditions of the middle class, they don’t want to convince the young ones to stay since the opportunities for the “modern” and “youthful” are assumed to be found elsewhere.

Local politicians and civil servants are in the middle of the conflict between the needs of local society for young people to take over the duties of the welfare society, and the duty of modern people to themselves make “the best” of their own lives. The middle class’s judgement of what is “the best life” is reflected in the civil servants’ and politicians’ view of what “real” and “normal” young people want and do.

To be an individual who can quickly depart and melt into new environments is a contemporary ideal, but this ideal is not realistic for working class young people, based on the actual opportunities, norms, values, and assumptions that make up their horizon of opportunity. The life choices of working class young people could be seen as regional assets, but for the influential adults remaining in the area this is not an active decision, but rather evidence of passivity and incompetence. In this way these young people have no experience or awareness that they might be able to contribute to regional development. Instead they are reinforced in their self-image, that they are resource-poor and without influence.

If the young people, who want to remain in the area, “don’t count”, neither will they become interested in themselves developing the society. In order that the resources that are included in social relationships shall accrue to the advantage of the individual or the group, the individual has to be aware of his or her resources (Lin et al 2001). The young people who say they want to “step up” and shoulder the responsibilities of previous generations aren’t noticed at all, or are regarded with distrust by many of the adults around them, since they are regarded as passive or unengaged. The working class young people in Söderhamn are met by a double message, where on one hand it is they who will shoulder the future of the region, while on the other hand they are stigmatized and perceived as having a lack of ambition just because this is what they want to do.

Even if the need for renewal is recognized in the region, the prevalent values mean that the young people who show interest in and a desire to remain are not regarded as the renewers of regional development. The norm and the internal logic that says that the young people “who count” will want to migrate, has as a consequence that there is no point in attracting young people to local development efforts. Seeing and treating the young people who want to stay as passive and lacking initiative risks contributing to the impoverishing of regional development. The young people who feel that there is no place for them *anywhere* can be assumed to be losers. The regions where they will live risk becoming losers in the same future scenario. Surely, therefore, the question is if the entire country could be at a loss when there are uninvolved people in impoverished regions?

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For a total reference list see my thesis:

<http://www.diva-portal.org/liu/theses/abstract.xsql?dbid=6524>

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