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To cite this article: Peter Carlman & Johan Högman (14 Dec 2023): Sports and mobile imperatives in the lives of rural youths, European Journal for Sport and Society, DOI: 10.1080/16138171.2023.2293521

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2023.2293521

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Published online: 14 Dec 2023.

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Sports and mobile imperatives in the lives of rural youths

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the mobility processes of rural youths in relation to sports. The mobility imperative has its basis in the fact that rural youths must be mobile to gain access to the resources they need to shape their lives and create their own identities. The mobility imperative is analysed as a constellation of interrelated processes in which material inequalities, symbolic hierarchies and entanglements between bodies and places interact in a process that constitutes the mobility of young rural dwellers. This study is based on research conducted in a rural community in Sweden. We conducted interviews with eight individuals and one focus group. The analysis, inspired by biographical interviews framed according to a critical realist perspective, focused on the interviewees’ subjective experiences and how broader social structures affected these experiences. The results of the analysis indicate that mobility is an inevitable necessity for sports participation during childhood. The rural sport mobility imperative is an interaction of related processes, such as a limited supply of sports clubs and facilities, limited access to sports activities that are highly valued in contemporary youth culture and an affective conflict in establishing a connection to urban places for sport interactions.

Introduction

This paper presents the perspectives of young people regarding rural mobile processes as it relates to their sports experiences. Previous studies of young people’s experiences with sports have revealed that young people’s participation in sports is related to social processes. It includes a wide variety of experiences and definitions of what a sport is and how it affects the participation of young people in and through sports. (Carlman, 2015; Engström, 2010; Green et al., 2015). Wright and MacDonald (2010, p. 2) claimed that it is of great importance to take into account how young people’s choices and participation in sport are made in the context of their personal
biographies and the political, economic, cultural and geographical contexts of their everyday lives. This study considered the spatial dimension of young people's sports participation in rural areas. We took into account that young people's relationships with sports are created in the different societal contexts in which they participate during childhood.

According to the Swedish Board of Agriculture, around 30 percent of Sweden's population lives in rural areas, and 197 out of Sweden's 290 municipalities are considered rural municipalities (Jordbruksverket, 2013). However, in Sweden, cities are still generally growing in population and prosperity, while rural towns and areas are decreasing in population and, with some exceptions, becoming more impoverished. Over the last 50 years, Swedish rural municipalities have undergone job and business restructuring, as well as closures of services and schools. A frequently highlighted concern is that young people are leaving the countryside and that youth activities ought to be expanded to stimulate development in rural areas. (Rönnlund, 2019; SOU, 2017, p. 1). In Sweden, there is no widely accepted definition of rural areas. Our case fits with the classification of Swedish municipalities produced by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. Rural municipalities have a population of less than 15,000 inhabitants in the largest urban area and a very low commuting rate (less than 30%) (Sveriges kommuner och landsting, 2011).

According to Farrugia (2014), the spatial dimensions of childhood and youth have a new meaning in today's society, with globalisation and individualisation creating new geographical inequalities, patterns of mobility and placemaking practices. Likewise, a growing body of evidence about differences in sport participation patterns according to residential location suggests that accessibility of sport are closely connected to residential location (Eime et al., 2015; Larsson, 2019). In this context, Button et al. (2020) stated that rural youths experience some barriers to sport that are distinct from those of urban youths. As such, researchers should better understand the contextual nuances of rural environments. Therefore, an important area of enquiry is how young people's sports develop in rural areas.

Drawing on frameworks that incorporate the concept of mobility, this paper suggests that rural young people's participation in sports can be usefully understood in relation to a mobility imperative. According to Farrugia (2016), mobility is particularly significant for rural youths who, in a rapidly urbanising world, experience a kind of mobility imperative. Farrugia focuses his work on the mobility imperative at the intersection of sociological and human geographical works on space and place and youth studies. This mobility imperative means that rural youths have a frequent need to be mobile to access the resources they need to navigate biographies and construct identities. With this as the basis, the purpose of our study was to improve knowledge about and achieve a greater understanding of the mobility processes of rural youths in relation to sports. Considering this, the research questions are as follows: (1) What significance do the material conditions of sports have for the mobility of rural young people?, (2) How do young people in rural areas relate to hierarchies within the contemporary culture of global sports?, (3) How can we understand young people's embodied and affective relationships to their local
neighbourhoods, and what significance does this have for their reasoning about mobility in relation to sports?

**Sports in the lives of rural young people**

Numerous studies have produced disparate outcomes regarding youth participation in sports in rural settings. However, in Sweden, urban and suburban areas exhibit the highest levels of sports club engagement, while rural municipalities show significantly lower levels of participation (Swedish Research Council for Sport Science, 2019). Several scholars highlight that participation likely varies across different types of rural regions, suggesting that greater consideration is required for the specific context within which these activities take place, given the substantial variations in sports organisation between different countries (Eime et al., 2015; Hoekman et al., 2017). A consensus among researchers, however, is that the range of sporting activities available in rural areas is considerably narrower. This narrowing can be attributed to the sparser population density in rural regions but can also be understood in light of sports policy frameworks that devalue rural sports and systematically marginalise rural residents (Rich & Misener, 2019).

Scholars have emphasised how the conditions for sports participation in rural areas are influenced by a public neoliberal governance approach wherein activities must be commercially viable to survive (Mair et al., 2019). This agenda has led to the flourishing of new commercial forms of sports, such as gyms and yoga studios, in urban settings, while sports clubs find it increasingly challenging to operate in rural areas. This situation yields diverse consequences for rural residents. Oncescu (2015) demonstrated how the closure of a major industry impacts recreational offerings not only directly, in terms of financial support, but also indirectly, with parents’ ability to engage in and support the sports organisation affected. Consequently, the range of leisure activities in rural areas suffers when fewer jobs are available in these areas. Mair et al. (2019) illustrated how, as public services dwindle, women in rural areas made themselves part of the healthcare system by actively ensuring the survival of sports clubs—for their own health and the well-being of others. Their study indicates how the choice to lead an adult (health-conscious) life in rural areas may entail increased personal responsibility for one’s own health. Spaaij (2009) highlighted the crucial role of sports in fostering cohesion in rural areas, where communal meeting spaces are often lacking. The limited range of sporting activities in these areas forces children and youth into specific sports-related identities in order to be able to integrate into the local community. Those who do not find a sport that resonates with them risk exclusion from the community. While sports clubs undoubtedly contribute to vital social cohesion and local/regional identity (Kellstedt et al., 2021; Pelletier et al., 2021), this holds true only for those who share the values of the sports clubs concerned. This prompts young individuals seeking personal identity and community to seek opportunities beyond their hometown.

While research has predominantly portrayed the evolution of a system that diminishes rural sports and marginalises rural youth (Rich & Misener, 2019), this does not entirely capture the way rural youth perceive their situation. Many young individuals take pride in their hometowns and value rural characteristics, such as nature, social
cohesion and safety. Relocating might open up new prospects but at the same time, it could mean giving up aspects of their rural communities that they cherish. This suggests that labelling rural youth solely as marginalised in terms of sports opportunities (Lee & Abbott, 2009) oversimplifies matters. As rural environments present alternative opportunities to urban settings, it is more productive to contemplate the diverse manners in which young people engage in sports in rural environments (Eime et al., 2015; Högman et al., 2022). Thus, adopting the perspectives of young people is a reasonable starting point to begin to understand the nuances of these dynamics in their lives.

**Mobility imperative as an analytical approach**

Sports studies in rural settings have indicated that distance can form a barrier to being active. Button et al. (2020) and Lee (2010) found that in rural communities, friends' houses, schools and/or recreation facilities were too far from a young people's homes, meaning they needed their parents to provide transport. However, contrary to expectations, the results of a study by Hoekman et al. (2017) showed that greater distances were associated with greater monthly participation in sports, not less. In addition, they discussed some alleged differences in the willingness to travel for sports participation. They suggested that among people who are more motivated to participate, distances are perceived as less of a barrier. This shows a limitation of analysing mobility solely based on physical distance.

Considering the above, Farrugia's (2016) three dimensions of young people's mobility imperative were selected as the theoretical and analytical framework for the present study. Farrugia (2016) introduced the mobility imperative as a constellation of interrelated processes in which material inequalities, symbolic hierarchies and entanglements between bodies and places interacts in a process that constitutes the mobility of rural youths.

Related to the first research question, the structural dimensions of rural youth mobilities refer to young people's positions within the flows of labour and capital that make up social structures. Concerning sport in a Swedish context, Lindroth (2011) argued that while sports are not the first activities to close down, population declines and other disassembly of rural areas can be so extensive that sports clubs and facilities begin to disappear, and consequently, sport opportunities become concentrated in urban areas.

Related to the second research question, the symbolic dimensions of rural youth mobilities refer to the positions that young people in rural communities may occupy within the flows of symbols and discourses that make up youth cultures and define the most valorised youth subjectivities. With regard to sports, Roberts (2018) described the strong cultural attractions of sports in terms of how young people are socialised, such as through the globalisation of television, as consumers of sports. In line with that stance, Carlman and Viktröm (2018) showed how young people with refugee backgrounds in Swedish sports clubs strengthened their sports capital in the sense that they learned symbols in sports, such as the names of famous players and teams, or the value of different brands of sportswear. They thus benefitted from recognised symbols that connected them not just with their peers in their sports club, but also...
with a larger sports community. These subjectivities are constructed through the appropriation of popular cultural symbols that provide resources for young people to position themselves within a sports culture. A separation between the rural and the urban is one of the ways in which flows of symbols and subjectivities are organised. Urban sports are characterised by trends, with more recent examples of trends being commercial fitness centres, padel, newer forms of dance and trampoline parks. Together with other contemporary activities, these activities are seen as attractive and desirable, which aligns with the notion of the city as a basis for development. Consequently, in these urban environments, it becomes easier to establish a lifestyle that is in line with the consumer culture that characterises the lives of young people (cf. Giulianotti & Numerato, 2018). These relationships of power and the notions that they create also contribute to the ways rural youths see and understand themselves (Stenbacka, 2011).

Conversely, traditional organised sports tend to play a more important role in rural communities than they do in metropolitan areas. Eime et al. (2015) found that there was more organised participation in remote areas of Australia, including the popular mainstream sports of football, basketball, cricket, floorball, netball, hockey and tennis. In addition, rural places are also associated with nature, so they have an abundance of natural resources for increasingly popular outdoor lifestyles and adventurous sports, such as mountain biking, kayaking, all forms of skiing and snow sports (Zuest, 2020).

Finally, related to the third research question, the non-representational dimensions of rural youth mobilities refer to the embodied and affective entanglements between young people and the spaces and places that contribute to the formation of their subjectivities. Importantly, place attachments are established through practices or concrete socially placed activities, which produce an affective, co-constitutive relationship between place and the body (Farrugia, 2016). This also requires an understanding of how, during childhood, young people may have been involved in various practices, such as Alanen’s (2001) concept of ‘childing practices’, which give rural children different experiences that influence how they relate to sport practices. Likewise, Lave and Wenger (1991) described how the incorporation of knowledge and skills that shape individuals’ lives is a social process that occurs through participation in a specific context, a process which they refer to as communities of practice. The practice and affective experience of mobility are shaped by previous place attachments. For rural youths, although the city offers structural and symbolic positions for sports that are unavailable to them at home, the city may also be a space of discomfort. This affective discomfort is experienced even when young people recognise the structural and symbolic imperatives encouraging them to travel. Lee and Abbott (2009) observed that what might be seen from the outside as marginalisation due to a lack of facilities and opportunities are aspects of rural living that rural young people are shaped by and, therefore, comfortable with. Thus, their participation in physical activities is consistent with other practices of becoming shaped by their rural homes. In relation to sport, they can conquer their appetite for sports, acquiring the relevant distinctive cognitive constructs and skilled moves necessary to become a sportsperson in a rural context (cf. Wacquant, 2014).

The framework offered here reveals the mobility imperative as a constellation of related processes in which material inequalities, symbolic hierarchies and
entanglements between bodies and places interact. This framework was used to analyse rural young people’s experiences of the mobility imperative and how this affects their participation in sports.

**Method and context**

This study was based on research conducted in a rural municipality in western Sweden with a population of approximately 9000 people. Interviews were conducted with young people growing up in a small locality of the municipality with a population of 653. The main local sports club offered football and floorball. The local area has a variety of sports facilities, but, as the results revealed, these are infrequently used for sports activities by young people. For example, there is an arena for indoor sports, and nearby are a football field, shooting range, tennis court and exercise track. In the municipality, at a distance of a mile or more from the local area, there are other sports available, such as ice hockey, golf, alpine skiing and motocross. All of these activities require transportation by car because public transport is limited in the area. This particular location was chosen because there was already an established contact in the area, which made it possible to reach respondents. The area is also a location in the region that is particularly affected by rural structural transformations. This municipality, like several other rural regions in Sweden, has experienced profound and challenging social and economic changes in recent decades, including population declines that have impacted not only the general social and cultural life in the rural area, but also the ways in which local residents perceived and experienced leisure and sports (Lindroth, 2011). In the text, pseudonyms are used for names of individuals, schools, sports clubs and places.

We conducted eight individual interviews and one focus group interview. The research included eight young people (four boys and four girls, aged 16–17 years). All interviewees had attended the local 9-year comprehensive school, and prior to the data collection, these participants had completed their first year of upper secondary education in a school in another municipality. The respondents were recruited through one of the researchers having contact with teachers at the local school, and with the help of previous class lists, the students were selected randomly. A letter was sent out containing information about the study’s purpose and ethical considerations, along with a request asking if they wanted to participate in the study. If no response had been received from a respondent a week after said letter was sent, the respondent was contacted by phone, with the same information as provided in the phone call.

The selection consisted of youth who were in their first year of high school. At this age, young people have the capacity to look back on their upbringing in rural areas while also entering their first phase of mobility, as they have partially or completely left their hometown for their high school studies. Another criterion was that the youth should have lived in the area throughout their entire upbringing. The selection includes youth with diverse experiences of different types of sports.

The first author conducted all the interviews. The times and locations of the individual interviews were adapted to the respondents’ wishes. Six interviews were
performed in a shielded location in a library near the participants’ upper secondary school. One interview was performed in an upper secondary school and another in a clubhouse adjacent to a football practice field. Before the interviews started, the respondents were given informed consent information about the study that had previously been communicated to them verbally and in writing. The interviews were recorded if the participant gave their approval and each lasted about 40–60 minutes. After the individual interviews, the respondents were asked to be part of a focus group, and ultimately, four participants (three girls and one boy) made up the focus group. A moderator (the first author) was also present for the focus group, which was held in the participants’ former comprehensive school and lasted 90 minutes.

Kvale (2006) argued that acknowledging the power relationship in interviews is necessary to establish objectivity and ethics in interview research. We consider this to be especially important when interviewing young people. We attempted to be aware of our position and our power and aimed to give power to the interviewees. The youths who were interviewed themselves decided when and where they were interviewed, as well as the type of information they wanted to share. We also clearly explained to them how they came to be chosen for the project. Moreover, to make the respondents feel safer, the interviewer clearly stated the purpose of the interview, as well as the types of questions being asked. The anonymity of participants was protected by altering their personal names, the names of places, schools, etc.

Two semi-structured interview guides were developed: one for the focus group and one for the individual interviews. The interview guide included questions about leisure habits previously and now, the leisure habits of parents and friends, and experiences of growing up in a rural community. During the group interview, the participants had more freedom to discuss overarching topics based on their shared experiences, with few follow-up questions from the interviewer. The questions broadly revolved around participants’ experiences and perceptions of sports in rural areas.

The combination of a focus group and individual interviews exposed different parts of the phenomena we studied and helped form a more extensive understanding of the phenomena. The two different datasets were equally useful; individual interviews were used to explore personal experiences, whereas focus groups were used to examine shared opinions and beliefs about the mobility processes of rural youths in relation to sports (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). The participant interviews supplied detailed descriptions of individual sports careers and influential factors in this regard, such as family support. The data from individuals were found to be particularly important when fine-tuning the descriptions of a pattern occurring in the focus group. The focus group was a rich and productive method of gaining access to well-established general knowledge and highlighting a shared picture of aspects of sport participation in the local villages in which the respondents had grown up. Thus, the design contributed to the identification of both individual and contextual circumstances (Michel, 1999).

The approach of the interviews, inspired by biographical interviews from a critical realist perspective (Bourdieu, 1999; Steensen, 2007), was to give the respondents an opportunity to explain themselves, how they give meaning to their experiences of sport and, in turn, how the social context affects these experiences. This was done by combining an understanding from within and from meaning with an explanation
from without through objective conditions. Critical realism presents an ontology that presupposes the existence of a real reality. In critical realism, individuals are referred to as more than their own identity projects. Instead, people find themselves in a dialectical relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. An individual’s actions are influenced by structures and concrete interaction processes. Individuals can then reproduce or transform these social structures through their actions. Research should be conducted not only to document how people’s lives evolve subjectively, but also to explain how life trajectories are enabled in society (Steensen, 2007; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021).

In accordance with theoretical interpretation (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), Farrugia’s (2016) three dimensions of the mobile imperative model were used in the analysis. The interviews were read several times with a theoretical reflection on specific themes of interest. The focus was on themes about how sport terms and accessibility were connected to the respondents’ locales, along with the significance of mobilities in these processes. The result was presented through three viewpoints: the structural dimension, the symbolic dimension and the non-representational dimension. The structural dimension discussed how respondents talked about material opportunities to take part in local sports and where they found places to participate in sports. For the symbolic dimension, the focus was on the meanings of ‘sport’ and how, in relation to sports that were available in their local area, respondents approached hierarchies in sport cultures and valorised various sport activities. Finally, the non-representational dimension considered how the respondents had developed a taste (or distaste) for the local area and the sports it offered.

In line with our critical realist perspective, we use Wiltshire and Ronkainen’s (2021) concept to illustrate the methods we used to analyse and assess the quality of the data presented. Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) describe three types of themes², experiential, inferential and dispositional, to outline a critical realist approach to analysing interviews. Experiential themes referring to subjective viewpoints such as beliefs and feelings like ‘there is nothing to do around here.’ or ‘Yes, yes. I go out and run, but I want to dance.’ Data was selected that illustrated the interviewees’ experiences and descriptions of sports participation in various ways. We examined statements among respondents that were similar to each other, but also statements that gave various descriptions of the respondents’ experiences of sport when growing up in a rural area. The quality of the data was determined by how well they could describe their experiences of sports and rural life. We chose to exclude statements that were not considered relevant to sports. In some cases, the boundary between sports and non-sports activities was discussed. The clearest example is when some respondents mentioned outdoor activities like hunting and fishing. These were something we excluded, as we deemed it to be too far from sports. However, when the respondents talked about training/exercising in nature on their own (e.g. running), we did count this as a form of sport.

Further, inferential themes refer to inferences and conceptual redescriptions using more abstract language. We used findings from previous studies to move beyond and contextualise the data-driven thinking captured in the data. For example, ‘Consequently, to paraphrase Wiborg (2001), this rural village seems to be a good place to be a sporting child, but not a good place to be a sporting youth.’ Here, we
were cautious not to stretch the interpretations too far beyond the respondents’ statements. Demonstrated exercised this caution by, among other things, not automatically falling into the common discourse that there is nothing to do in rural areas. Instead, we also highlighted that some of the interviewees were able to find a range of sports opportunities (even if they required a certain type of mobility) in their rural communities. For example, ‘Consequently, some participants valued the traditional sports that existed in their rural areas.’

Finally, dispositional themes refer to theories about the properties and powers that must exist in order to produce the phenomena being studied. Dispositional themes necessarily rely on the previous levels of themes but move beyond them by thinking retroactively. Generated dispositional themes rest on the acceptance of certain theoretical premises. For example, the following statement is a product of the mobility imperative concept: ‘The limited availability of sports in the rural localities places these young people at a structural disadvantage and it means that their participation must be negotiated through mobilities.’ These results are influenced by the chosen theoretical perspective; there could also be other perspectives that are equally valid. However, with the support of the explanatory power as a validity indicator, the concept of the mobility imperative helped us explain the inferential and experiential themes that were related to it and achieve a deeper understanding of youth sports in rural areas. A strength of the method used in this study was that Farrugia (2016) provided three dimensions of young people’s mobility imperative, which permitted a focus on different aspects and related processes of how sport terms and accessibility are connected to the respondents’ locales and the significance of mobilities in these processes. The process of generating experiential, inferential and dispositional themes was not a linear and hierarchical process but rather was one that moved back and forth and sometimes overlapped.

**Results and discussion**

**The structural dimension**

The results reflect the frequent observation that rural young people are structurally disadvantaged (Farrugia, 2016). The respondents in this study were unable to access all the resources required to build their sport life. In the focus group and individual interviews, the respondents discussed the range of sports available in their local villages. They noted that there was a limited supply of sport activities, and a common statement among the participants was ‘there is nothing to do around here.’ There was a general disillusion with the lack of sports opportunities near their home villages, and many wished they lived closer to a city. Parts of the discussion emerged as follows.

I: ‘Have you thought that you would rather live in Storviken [a city in a neighbouring municipality]?’

T1: ‘Aah. I have thought so. I want to.’

T3: ‘I would like to live closer to Storviken.’

The respondents talked about feeling isolated in their local villages. One said, ‘It is pretty isolated in Järnfors. It is a stupid thing, as there are no buses at all on the weekends, not to or from, so it is not possible to get anywhere.’
They said that one reason for the limited supply of sports activities was that several sports clubs were inactive, and the facilities were no longer in use because there were no leaders. The following conversation demonstrates how they wished there were more people who would engage in local sports:

T1: ‘They must dare to invest.’
T2: ‘But there are opportunities. They have tennis courts here. They have tennis courts.’
T1: ‘Yes, but they need …’
T4: ‘There must be someone who wants to do it.’
T2: ‘It is. As with athletics, there is an athletics facility. We have everything you need; you just need to arrange it.’

The respondents shared that the many inactive clubs in rural areas could be a reflection of the disassembly of these areas. In Oncescu (2015), this relationship was demonstrated by the range of leisure activities that suffer when fewer jobs are available in rural areas. According to Lindroth (2011), sport is not the first activity to go, but population decline and other disassembly in rural areas could become so extensive that sports clubs and facilities are in danger of having to close as well, and this closure would result in an increased concentration of sports activities in urban areas. Likewise, Mair et al. (2019) revealed that sport clubs find it challenging to operate in rural areas, while in cities a varying array of sports activities are offered. This is illustrated and made clear in the respondents’ discussions about the relationship between the city and the countryside.

The respondents described how they needed to migrate to a city to access sports opportunities. The reason given for this was that many of the sports they wished to engage in were not provided locally (e.g. dance and fitness centres) or that the local sports clubs were not at the level they required. Therefore, they were forced to develop a relationship with nearby urban areas and became increasingly dependent on the cities for the sports organised there. The following conversation is an example of how the respondents would experience mobility imperatives to participate in a sport:

T2: ‘Only the football club works.’
T1: ‘Yes, that is it.’
K: ‘Not even football works now, now they have a team together with Grans BK’ [another football club in the municipality].
T1: ‘Yes, even that. Nothing was there. For example, if you want to dance, as Maria and I want to, then we have to go to Storviken, Norrby, Alstad’ [examples of cities in other municipalities].
K: ‘In Storviken’, ‘there are probably most things to be found.’

One respondent also noted the following:

I have been to the Strong Body [A fitness centre in a city in another municipality] and danced all their dances. I want to continue with that, but you cannot do that here in Järnfors. So, you have to go to Storviken [the city where the fitness centre is], and it is not so easy for us without a driver’s licence. Because the last bus goes at quarter past six, and the lesson starts at six. It’s not easy.
As is evident in these remarks, rural youths must be mobile to access the resources they need to build their sports lives. For these rural youths, the necessity of mobility applies to both getting to and from urban areas, but also from one sport facility to the next in the local municipality, which are spread apart from each other and the respondents’ homes.

Hockey was not that easy, because then you need to go to Anneberg [the largest locality in the municipality]. However, alpine skiing was a little easier because it was quite close then, and Dad liked alpine skiing. Football was simple and floorball, too, because it was in Järnfors. However, football stopped in Järnfors and started in Anneberg for those who wanted to get better in football and be on a better team. Then, it was a little longer to drive again. Then, when I participated in motocross, it was in Anneberg. It was so far that you had to go by car.

In accordance with Button et al. (2020), regardless of whether these young people chose to participate in a sport in the local municipality or in an urban location, recreation facilities were located at a distance from the respondents’ homes, which means they needed their parents to provide transportation. As evidenced in their conversations, distance makes it difficult to get to sports activities because of the lack of public transportation and the dependence of the respondents on private transportation. Consequently, before they get old enough to get their own driver’s licence, they are dependent on their parents to participate in sports.

The limited supply of sports has created a strong mobility imperative for these respondents. They migrate to cities in other municipalities and to other places in the local municipality to access sports opportunities that are not available in their home villages. The limited availability of sports in the rural localities places these young people at a structural disadvantage, and it means that their participation must be negotiated through mobilities.

The symbolic dimension

It must be noted that a lack of sports in itself was not viewed as the most problematic; rather, the respondents primarily expressed disappointment over the limited range of local sports. In accordance with Eimes et al.’s (2015) Australian study, the respondents described how local sports were dominated by traditional mainstream sports, such as football. They referred to the city as a place where modern sports facilities, such as fitness centres, were available. One girl said it was problematic to grow up in a smaller place with a limited range of sports: ‘If you’re not interested in football, it is not easy to find another (sport) activity. It is tough to grow up and live in Järnfors.’ The range of sports offered in the local area where she grew up meant a restriction that prevented her from participating in sports. When she started commuting to her upper secondary education in a city with a wider range of activities, it opened up the possibility of increased participation in sports. In the city, she found activities that fit her lifestyle. ‘Now I exercise (…) and I have started to attend a gym, but I am not participating in sport in that way (traditional organised sport), because I am afraid of balls.’ This is an example of the recent trend of increased participation in gyms and fitness centres, especially among girls. Green (2018) described the broadening and diversification of sports participation among youth. The relatively new provision of commercial gyms for individual health and fitness activities emerged
alongside voluntary sports clubs and competitive team games. Against the backdrop of the expanded meanings of sports associated with a wider array of physical practices and cultures that have close ties to consumer culture lifestyles, such as fitness industries and alternative sports (Giulianotti and Numerato, 2018; Mair, 2019), these rural youths described their local places as boring, a space in which nothing happened (Farrugia, 2014). The opportunities for consumption and leisure experiences available in cities have come to define youth culture.

However, from the interviews, it appears all too easy to label rural youths as marginalised in terms of sport opportunities. Diversification of sports participation also means that there are young people who want to participate in locally available traditional organised sports. Engström (2010) suggested that different forms of physical activity are surrounded by different cultural values, which affect how individuals devote themselves to participating in different leisure activities. In line with Engström's results, respondents with preferences for traditional competitive team games painted a brighter picture of the local sport culture. Consequently, some participants valued the traditional sports that existed in their rural areas. One respondent said, 'Yes. I did a lot, mainly football. I played it a lot until, I think, seventh grade. And then floorball in the winter and skiing, so there was some stuff to do, but it was mostly football.' This is in line with previous research that has shown that athletes in rural areas view sports clubs as an important part of life. Sports clubs contribute to social cohesion and a local and regional identity (Kellstedt et al., 2021; Pelletier et al., 2021; Spaaij, 2009). However, these young people stated that they and several of their friends had dropped out of sports in their early teens. This is a general pattern in young people's sports participation and is not specific to rural young people (Carlman et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, from the concept of a mobility imperative, there are indications that this rural village sets up specific contexts for dropping out of sports. This was reflected by a boy who described himself as a sportsperson with a childhood characterised by traditional organised sports. He quit the local team when he got older and moved to a better, more professional team located in an urban area. He experienced the mobility imperative as a way to improve his skills in sports. This is an example of how the respondents described their departure from locally provided sports and to search in cities and other localities for other sporting activities better suited to their interests and identities.

The foregoing notwithstanding, respondents described how the rural village had an abundance of natural resources for sporting activities, and how during their childhoods, they would run or ride their bikes around the local area. However, at the time of the interviews, they had become ambivalent about these kinds of sports activities. Even if they agreed that they were good ways to exercise, they now viewed them as activities they were forced to do: 'Yes, yes. I go out and run, but I want to dance.' Consequently, to paraphrase Wiborg (2001), this rural village seems to be a good place to be a sporting child but not a good place to be a sporting youth.

The interviews illustrate how the young people in the study respond to hierarchies in sport cultures and define contemporary valorised sports activities. The sports activity they preferred was articulated in their lifestyles, and the flow of symbols and discourses concerning sports has made them aware of sports activities that have historically not been available in their local areas. Consequently, they wanted a different
range of sports activities and were disappointed when these activities were not available locally. This result indicates that sporting biographies have become personal (reflexive) projects or (choice) biographies (Green et al., 2015). Therefore, all rural youth in the study were dissatisfied with traditional organised sports and instead required other forms of sports. However, voluntary sports clubs and competitive team games have value for young people. Mainstream sports, such as football, are popular activities, and the sports media has spread many symbols and discourses. In addition, sports stars have become international celebrities. This may contribute to the fact that some rural young people are attracted to local sports, where, for example, the local football club can become a local subculture (Farrugia, 2016) that articulates the styles and modes of the global sport of football. It should be noted, however, that these transnational cultural flows might have a role to play in the process of young people leaving local football clubs to get into more professional urban clubs. Ultimately, the local rural football club does not meet youthful expectations of what real football is. Instead, expectations of what football is reveal a mobile imperative to transfer to more professional urban football clubs.

The non-representational dimension

However, in non-representational approaches to mobility, there are experiences of mobility that escape the respondent’s individualised reflexivity, and sports mobilities are shaped by more than structural opportunities (Farrugia, 2016). That is, the respondents experienced embodied feelings of comfort and belonging in their local places. These embodied feelings emerged from practices where the respondents established an affective relationship to place, including school, friends, family and neighbours. In both the individual and the focus group interviews, the respondents discussed how they enjoyed growing up in the rural area in which they grew up and felt a strong sense of belonging to the place.

T2: ‘That is wonderful.’ [to live in Järnfors].

T1: ‘Do you think it is wonderful?’

T2: ‘We have neighbours to visit us every day. It is very fun!’

T1: ‘I notice now how much I really miss it and how much I really feel at home in Järnfors. It is my home.’

T2: ‘I understand what you mean. It is home.’

This meant mixed feelings, however, when they discovered that their home village could not offer the sports activities they were striving for. Several participants noted that they would prefer to stay in their local areas but had to establish affective relationships with new places to pursue the sports they wanted to participate in. The respondents expressed what Farrugia (2016) called a conflict between rural homes and urban opportunities. This is a consequence of the practice and affective experience of mobility being shaped by preceding place attachments, and for rural youth, the city may be a space of discomfort, even if it offers activities that are unavailable at home. One respondent mentioned that it is not so easy to leave your local area
because there are friends in your home village with whom you have been friends your whole life. ‘You do not want to leave Järnfors either, because the friends you have in Järnfors are the ones you have had since you were five years old.’

The context of school physical education (PE) and sports programmes in school helped us understand the respondents’ experiences of embodied feelings of comfort and belonging in their communities and local neighbourhoods. They described their enjoyment of the local school they had attended and spoke of good cohesion in the class, with pupils supporting each other during school sports activities. This contributed in a positive way to the school being perceived as a place for sports where they felt safe and which instilled a desire to move together and be physically active. They did not feel the same levels of comfort and belonging in PE at their upper secondary schools. As one respondent said, ‘You actually miss that time (in the local compulsory school). It was really good there. I have never felt that here at Storviken High School [the upper secondary school], as if we were a group. I have heard that from several previous classmates (from the local compulsory school).’ Another replied, ‘It was very good at Järnfors School (the local school). There was not much trouble or such. That was good. I am glad I went there and not in Storviken (the upper secondary school’s town).’ The sport activities that the respondents appreciated and were involved in at the local school can be described as situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and connected to age, peers and the specific location of the school. It was in these specific practices and in these specific places that the respondents’ feelings about sports were created. Consequently, it is more uncertain what happens to the respondents’ feelings about sports when they move to new places and contexts with new individuals in strange environments. What they described was that they did not feel the same kind of comfort and belonging in the school sports at the upper secondary school as they did in the local compulsory school.

A further aspect of the non-representational dimension is how respondents who engaged in the local sports environment during childhood as part of their mobility practice generated feelings of belonging and experienced better environmental and social relationships, which contributed to their sports lives. What was similar across these respondents was their level of family support. In agreement with Lee and Abbott (2009), family was important in developing a sense of place and shaping the experiences of sports. The respondents were involved in sports with their parents as co-participants. ‘On the weekends, I play golf with Dad.’ Parents also played supporting roles, such as providing transportation: ‘Dad thought we should get involved in sports. He had grown up with that, so he thought I should do the same. He drove me to sports activities two days a week.’ They talked about how their families had an interest in sports, and their parents had supported and encouraged them to take part in sports. First and foremost, their parents drove them to matches and practices in cities and larger communities located miles from home because most of the sports activities were not close to home. As noted by Lee (2010), physical distances and limited local structured opportunities meant that these rural youths spent a lot of time with their families and therefore felt strong familial connections. They also tended to embody their families’ interests and desires for sports. In this way, these young people gain sports capital within the legitimised boundaries of the rural places they are from. In the context of these sports mobility practices and their connections to their families, they developed an appropriate appetite for sports, acquiring the relevant distinctive cognitive constructs and skilled moves necessary to become a sportsperson (cf. Wacquant, 2014).
Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to improve knowledge about and achieve a greater understanding of the mobility processes of rural youths in relation to sports. The study describes rural youths' participation in sports from a spatial perspective, exploring how the mobility imperative describes processes that encourage or mandate mobility in young rural people's pursuit of sports. However, we want to emphasise that the focus of this study was on mobility, and that the multitude of other perspectives of rural young people is not addressed in the study.

The study helps shed lights on how the need for mobility affects young people's involvement in sports in rural areas and how this mobility is a central aspect of rural sporting childhood and youth. This implies that it is important to consider a specific sports mobility imperative when discussing rural sports. The mobility imperative, which becomes visibly evident in the study, means that for young rural people, mobility is a necessity for accessing the resources they need to construct a sports life. Here, it becomes apparent that to understand the sports activities of a young person's, the young person's childhood and youth first needs to be understood as a whole. Participation in sports is not a separate part of young people's lives; rather, sports are closely linked to how these youths perceive themselves and their relationship to the social world in which they live.

According to the results, mobility processes have different meanings for different individuals. The results show the importance of considering the plurality of a rural sports life. Through mobile processes, rural locations provide possibilities for young people to participate in sports and gain sports capital. However, being mobile requires resources. Young people without resources that enable them to be mobile during youth risk becoming marginalised and being excluded from the community. The results highlighted support from parents as a typical resource. Further research is needed to investigate how different rural young people gain access to the mobile practices needed for participation in sports. It is particularly important to study young people who do not engage in sports. This study has primarily focused on those who have more or less been involved in sports. However, attention to the affective structure of a young person's relationship to rural spaces provides insight into the discovery that moving for the sake of sports participation is not a matter, of course, even if these youths have the possibility of doing so. A positive affective relationship with their home village reveals that young people may stay at home despite the possibility of participating in their desired sports activities in urban areas. In line with previous research (e.g. Rich & Misener, 2019), the results not only demonstrate a systematic dismantling of rural areas that contributes to young people wanting to leave, but also demonstrates that young people take pride in where they come from. Nonetheless, these young people need to relate to mobility processes.

The study's context represents a rural area with population declines and other disassembly, and sports are seen here within the framework of broader societal processes that systematically exclude rural residents (Rich & Misener, 2019). This is evident in relation to the study's first and second research questions. However, in recent years, both new and traditional sports practiced in rural areas have seen positive developments. This primarily involves various lifestyle and adventure sports,
such as mountain biking, kayaking, climbing, etc. (Zuest, 2020). Further research would benefit from examining how the development of lifestyle and adventure sports influences perspectives on and participation in sports among rural youth.

Against the backdrop of the results and our methodological points of departure, we will finally discuss how a critical realism perspective (Steensen, 2007) could inform the analysis of rural mobile practices for sports participation. The study’s starting point in critical realism explains the mobility imperative as a constellation of related processes in which material inequalities, symbolic hierarchies, and entanglements between bodies and places interact, thereby connecting the study’s three research questions. This paper, like previous research, shows that different sports are available in rural and urban areas. This is a materialised reality in the distribution of resources. However, predetermined structures cannot determine in advance what people should think and do. Individual thoughts and actions are the result of activities in social contexts over time. A critical realist perspective sees a dialectical relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. An individual’s actions are influenced by structures and concrete interaction processes. Young people from rural areas, therefore, respond to the mobile imperative related to sports participation in a variety of ways. Consequently, the drawing of general dichotomous conclusions should be avoided, given that, for example, the symbolic and material limitations of sports activities in rural areas are the same as those of no sport participation. We will emphasise how important it is to note that rural sports participation are constructed through mobility processes in relation to each rural young person’s combination of environment and history. The basis of a rural sports participation is the specific rural location’s social and cultural history, including the local sports culture. Essentially, during childhood and youth, all young people interact with family, friends, schoolmates and more, accumulating their own history that will influence how they respond to the sport mobility imperative.

Notes

1. In Sweden, a municipality is a fundamental administrative unit responsible for local self-government and various community services. Each municipality has a specific geographic area and an elected assembly, the municipal council.

2. Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) describe it as themes. We do not interpret it as overarching themes presented in the results, but rather as different levels of data that structure and generate the results.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Centrum för idrottsforsk [P2022-0149]

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