Chapter 1

Introduction
1.1. Motivation

*From residential village to active community* is the title of a short documentary about Sterksel, a small village of approximately 1,200 inhabitants located in the southern part of the Netherlands. The documentary portrays residents who collectively and voluntarily participate in village life in order to run facilities that would not otherwise exist. For example, the villagers have set up a health cooperative to meet the needs and wants of an ageing village population. They also run a local supermarket and organise an annual village fair. In the documentary, the chair of the local village council explains that the people of Sterksel do not want to wait for the local government to take action; instead, they work proactively to keep the village liveable. Sterksel’s residents believe that for each problem encountered in the village, the solution lies in a citizens’ initiative. In other words, active residents are claiming the lead in directing the course of the village’s development. An active and engaged village community, such as that of Sterksel, seems to be capable of safeguarding village liveability in an era of government withdrawal.

Sterksel presents a textbook example of a village that complies with contemporary governmental ideals regarding a self-reliant village community within the ‘participation society’ (the Dutch equivalent of the British ‘Big Society’ concept). Local governments endorse the reallocation of responsibilities from the central state to local communities, holding residents responsible for the quality of local society and public space. This transition to a ‘participation society’ entails the promotion of a culture of volunteering, self-reliance and citizens’ initiatives. Policymakers promoting this culture increasingly expect rural citizens to be willing to actively participate in various aspects of village life on a voluntary basis to keep their villages liveable (Mohan, 2012; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013; Woolvin & Hardill, 2013; Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010). There is a considerable amount of support among academics for these governmental beliefs, as studies indicate that residents of cohesive local communities report high levels of health (Mohnen et al., 2011), community action (Theodori, 2004) and security (Sampson et al., 1997).

It is thought that rural communities comprising homogenous and close-knit populations with deeply rooted village-based bonds are increasingly developing into communities comprising heterogeneous populations with more loose-knit social ties (Tönnies, 1887; Groot, 1989). Within such loose-knit communities,
residents’ relations with their living environment are becoming increasingly consumptive (Marsden, 1992). Against this background, the contemporary policy emphasis on citizen activity is remarkable, because recent societal developments have indicated less rather than more engagement within local communities (e.g. Simmel, 1971; Wellman & Leighton, 1979; Salamon, 2003). Whereas villagers used to live in relatively ‘autonomous villages’ in which they both worked and lived, contemporary villages are thought to have been transformed into ‘residential villages’ where villagers live but do not necessarily spend their professional and social lives (Thissen & Loopmans, 2013). Processes of suburbanisation and counter urbanisation have brought new inhabitants with diverse lifestyles, interests and orientations to the countryside. Some village residents may still perceive their lives within a rural setting as an all-encompassing way of life, whereas others may consider their village to be merely a place to live in. In this light, Murdoch et al. (2003, p. 9) argue that ‘now it is regularly asserted that rurality has splintered into many competing ruralities, ruralities that are associated with the various demands on rural space being made by different groups’. These developments raise the following question. To what extent do present-day rural residents experience village attachment, and how willing are they to become active in local clubs and organisations?

Life in European villages is influenced by demographic processes of ageing, population decline and the out-migration of highly educated individuals (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010). In north-western European countries, these long-term rural changes do not necessarily affect the rural quality of life in a negative way, as most rural residents are mobile and maintain strong connections with urban centres for professional and social reasons. In other words, their ability to live a pleasant life in the countryside is not dependent on what a village has to offer (Walker & Clark, 2010; Flaherty & Brown, 2010). However, the loss of traditional village culture, facilities, structures and community life can prompt a ‘discourse of loss’ in which a section of rural residents with strong local attachments mourns the disappearance of the village they once knew (Cook et al., 2007; Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). To some extent, these residents hold the group of more mobile and outwardly-orientated residents responsible for the loss of social cohesion and the decline of community spirit (Cloke et al., 1998). Although the loss of the village community and facilities occasionally sparks community engagement, it may also result in further marginalisation of vulnerable village residents. The number of residents interested in carrying out
voluntary work may be small, and the number of voluntary tasks that these residents need to handle can be overwhelming (Salemink et al., 2017). The risk of volunteers becoming disappointed and overburdened is therefore a serious one in a participation society, as a number of residents wish to volunteer in activities to counteract inevitable rural changes, such as preserving threatened local facilities and services (Wiersma & Koster, 2013).

The ‘discourse of loss’ entails the expectation that a section of residents has maintained strong bonds of attachment with the living environment along with feelings of nostalgia towards the village that once was. Another section of residents who are more mobile and outwardly orientated are thought to have a weaker attachment, resulting in a lack of commitment that may affect their willingness to become active in village life. This, in turn, could negatively affect the village’s resilience and liveability. However, at the same time, a ‘rediscovery’ of place could occur (Lewicka, 2005). Savage et al. (2005; 2010) have introduced the concept of ‘selective belonging’, which refers to the idea that place remains significant in the lives of most people, because place attachment became increasingly optional with greater mobility. Increased residential, daily and digital mobility provides residents with increased freedom of choice to select those residential environments that fit with their personal wants, needs and lifestyles (Savage, 2010). This suggests that mobile individuals have better opportunities to choose how they would like to be attached to specific aspects of the village. This results in a process of ‘selective belonging’, which entails spatially and socially uneven attachments to the living environment (Watt, 2009; Benson & Jackson, 2012). A section of recent in-migrants has been found to form strong social bonds with fellow residents, whereas other in-migrants are strongly attached to the environmental qualities of a village (Gustafson, 2009). Consequently, an increased emphasis on mobility and consequential freedom of choice ‘greatly complicates our understanding of what [the] rural is and what it is to become’ (Bell & Osti, 2010; p. 203). Diverse modes of village attachment may therefore be related to differing motivations behind volunteering in village life.

Thus, there are contrasting views regarding the development of village attachment. A better understanding of how present-day residents are attached to their villages will contribute to a realistic assessment of what can be expected of the village community and may enable the discovery of new ways of bringing about liveable villages. The example of Sterksel reveals that village populations
can be resilient and are well able to take matters into their own hands. Villages that successfully cope with structural rural changes are often associated with high levels of human capital (e.g., social, intellectual and financial capital), which especially pertains to residents’ individual qualities, knowledge and skills. However, the resources that residents possess are not necessarily invested in the immediate living environment. Although a certain degree of local attachment also seems to be a necessary ingredient for residents to become active, its role in community participation and planning often remains under-examined (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). As the residents of Sterksel demonstrate, shared attachment to a place can motivate cooperative efforts to improve a community. This raises the question of how liveability can be safeguarded in villages that do not contain social entrepreneurs or in which residents live their lives within the wider ambit of the village and community ties are less strong. Not all rural residents strongly identify with the immediate residential environment, because they may have only limited or selective attachments to specific aspects of the residential area, such as its nature and greenery. Others may choose to live an autonomous and anonymous life in the countryside. This suggests the importance of assessing the relationships between diverse and selective types of village attachment and motivations to volunteer in village life in order to better understand the potential and limitations of the participation society in rural areas.

1.2. Research aim and questions

In light of the discussion presented in the previous section, the objective of this thesis is to explore village attachment as a multidimensional phenomenon and to examine how variations in village attachment manifest in present-day rural society. The first set of research questions guiding this thesis focus on the concept of village attachment itself and the conditions that contribute to it. They read as follows. RQ1: What types of contemporary village attachment can be distinguished in Dutch rural areas? RQ2: To what extent does the availability of village facilities contribute to residents’ social place attachment? The above questions will be addressed through an overview and discussion of how present-day villagers are attached to their rural living environment and how village facilities relate to social place attachment. Although studies on general attachment are numerous (Lewicka, 2011), a sophisticated typology that explains how residents are attached to their villages in contemporary contexts is currently lacking. Also, a statistical model that examines the relationships between different facilities and social place attachment is expected to yield insights on the social
importance of various facilities within contemporary rural societies. Thus, this thesis contributes to the advancement of the place attachment literature.

The second set of research questions pertains to the different ways in which present-day village residents manifestly relate to their immediate living environment in terms of volunteering and perceptions of liveability. Specifically, two research questions are posed. The first of these questions is: Are general and selective forms of village attachment able to predict voluntary citizen activity in various local clubs and organisations? (RQ3) The second question is: Do different groups of rural residents perceive the availability of opportunities to volunteer in village social life as a significant determinant of liveability, and how do differences in voluntary activity affect perceptions of liveability? (RQ4) The premise of this thesis is that the rural population is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of attachment, which impacts on perceptions of village liveability among different sections of the present-day rural population and their motivations to volunteer in village life. A study that examines the relationship between attachment and volunteering will yield a better understanding of how increased freedom of choice to attach to specific sub-aspects of the countryside may have transformed residents' willingness to volunteer within village communities. Volunteering in village life is not self-evident, and non-volunteering could be the result of a deliberate and often-made decision. Also, in order to discuss the opportunities and limitations provided by the participation society, it is helpful to examine whether and how volunteering in village life and individual perceptions of liveability are interrelated and how differences in local activities influence the ways in which residents perceive the quality of their living environment. A study that attempts to answer these questions will contribute to ascertaining residents' willingness to volunteer and the importance of opportunities to volunteer in present-day rural living.

1.3. The concept of village attachment

Village attachment is the core concept of this thesis. In the environmental psychology literature, attachment is often defined as 'bonds between people and place based on affection (emotion, feeling), cognition (thought, knowledge, belief) and practice (action, behaviour)' (Gustafson, 2006; p.19; see also Low & Altman, 1992). Whereas environmental psychologists usually measure relationships between specific aspects of place and individual behaviours, human geographers have shown a keen interest in the subjective experiences and meanings of place
The premise of this thesis is that the rural population is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of present-day rural living. Increasing mobility of rural residents has resulted in the meanings of place becoming more complex as different sections of the rural population attach differently to different aspects of the rural environment (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Halfacree, 2012; Bell & Osti, 2010). The literatures on place attachment and rural mobilities will be synthesised in order to examine how contemporary rural residents are attached to their living environment, while recognising that the meanings of rural places are continually defined and redefined by an increasingly mobile rural population (Gustafson 2006).

The disappearance of historic communal roots as a key determinant of general place attachment makes it necessary to rethink the various aspects of place that contribute to contemporary forms of place attachment. In this thesis, four dimensions of place attachment are distinguished: environmental, social, cultural and functional. A distinction is commonly made between the environmental and social dimensions of place attachment (Breham et al., 2006; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Some people choose to live near beautiful natural scenery and can quickly develop a strong environmental attachment, while others prefer to be part of a tight village community and have a strong social attachment to the social qualities of the village. Also, village residents develop a cultural attachment by being actively engaged in local cultural practices, which can elicit feelings of ‘being at home’ and a sense of local identity (Panelli et al., 2008). Last, a functional attachment reflects residents’ dependence on a village for the provision of basic needs and as a site for conducting daily activities (Williams & Vaske, 2003). This thesis reveals that different groups of residents relate to their residential surroundings in rural areas according to these four distinctive forms of attachment, demonstrating variations in village attachment. Thus, individuals’ attachment to a place should be understood as a reflexive process in which they have increased freedom of choice to become attached to specific aspects of the village.

1.4. Methods and data

This thesis examines how contemporary residents are attached to their villages and how their diverse attachments impact on their decisions to volunteer in village life. Quantitative data compiled by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) as part of the Socially Vital Countryside Database 2014 Survey (SVP’14) were employed in the study. A survey was conducted among a randomly
chosen sample of the rural population in the Netherlands, defined as inhabitants of Dutch villages (<3,000 inhabitants) and outlying areas and aged at least 15 years. The sample was randomly drawn by Statistics Netherlands from the Municipal Persons Database (GBA). The data were collected in autumn 2014. A total of 7,840 rural residents completed the survey. A weighting factor was developed to adjust for selective representation based on age, gender, ethnicity, household income, source of income, village size, proximity to the city and part of the country. In this way, inferences could be made and extended to the total Dutch rural population numbering more than two million inhabitants. A second smaller dataset was also used with the specific aim of exploring how different aspects of place, such as opportunities to volunteer and availability of local facilities, contribute to residents’ perceptions of liveability.

The use of a large, nationwide and representative dataset is rare within European rural studies, as studies on the relationship between attachment and volunteering have adopted a predominantly qualitative focus. A disadvantage of qualitative studies is their lack of generalisability to a larger rural context. Consequently, studies focusing on the marginalised and the extraordinary are generally overrepresented in the academic literature on rurality. This study responds to Smith’s (2007) call for more quantitatively oriented research in order to identify and explore wider general patterns of rural social change. The collaboration with the SCP allowed for more rigorous data analysis, enabling statements to be made about systematic developments in rural areas, which in this specific case relate to variations in village attachment and their impact on volunteering. This dataset also deviated from other datasets, as it included respondents’ opinions on relevant rural issues and village activities, thereby offering rich insights into the characteristics, quality of life, attachments and volunteering of present-day rural residents in different types of rural areas.

The original purpose of compiling this dataset was to study current developments in village life in relation to prevailing policy issues at the national, regional and local levels (cf., Vermeij, 2015, 2016; Vermeij & Gieling, 2016; Steenbekkers & Vermeij, 2017). This dataset was used to carry out a number of academic studies entailing data analysis conducted within a scientific theoretical framework. Advanced statistical methods were also used to develop general statements on how contemporary Dutch rural inhabitants are attached to their villages and how different types of attachment may manifest in various dealings with the village and its immediate surroundings.
The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has classified the Dutch countryside within two categories: ‘predominantly urban’ and ‘intermediate’ (Brezzi et al., 2011). It is therefore important to bear in mind that the data were collected in the specific context of the Dutch countryside, which is relatively urbanised and densely populated. Regional urban centres are accessible within half an hour’s travel time from almost anywhere in the country. As a result of advances in transportation and communication technology, it is expected that physical distance will become increasingly less significant not only in the Netherlands but also in other regions of the world. The social and cultural changes identified in this thesis are thus likely to occur in other countries as well, although geographical differences will remain. This makes this thesis of interest to an international readership.

1.5. Thesis outline

The core of this thesis, which addresses the four research questions, consists of four studies presented in Chapters 2–5. The causes of place attachment are examined in Chapters 2 and 3. The aim of these chapters is to generate a critical discussion on the concept of village attachment and subsequently to present a typology of different types of village attachment. Specifically, Chapter 2 is aimed at providing insights into how present-day rural residents are attached to their villages and their surroundings. In this chapter, the conventional and widely applied distinction between locals and newcomers, wherein the latter are considered to have only weak village attachments compared with the former, is challenged. A typology of rural residents is proposed, based on their degrees of social, functional, cultural and environmental attachment. Thus, rural residents can be categorised into various groups according to their type of village attachment. The conclusion that simplistic distinctions, such as that drawn between locals and newcomers, do not adequately describe present-day variations in village attachment is further explored in the remaining chapters.

In Chapter 3, the relationship between village facilities and residents’ social place attachment is examined. Most residents no longer rely on locally available facilities for their primary functions. However, village facilities also entail a social function as places where villagers meet and interact with each other. Assuming that different facilities impact differently on the social place attachment of different groups of residents, this chapter raises the question of how traditional
village structures, such as these facilities, operate in contemporary village societies and whether or not they contribute to social place attachment.

In Chapters 4 and 5, the consequences of different forms of place attachment on residents’ willingness to become actively involved in village life are assessed. Chapter 4 explores how different forms of attachment affect residents’ willingness to volunteer in various village clubs and organisations. According to the theory of elective belonging, rural residents have options for shaping their local attachments and involvement. Thus, we can assume that village attachment is becoming more selective and individualised. This analytical framework is applied in this chapter to assess how general and selective forms of village attachment affect volunteering in village life.

Chapter 5 focuses on an examination of the ways in which different rural residents relate to perceived liveability and the role of volunteering opportunities in this regard. In the context of the participation society, residents’ willingness to volunteer is commonly assumed to be an important determinant of liveability. The analysis presented in this chapter, which differentiates a sample of rural residents in the province of Friesland into non-participants, nominal participants and active participants, is aimed at providing a better understanding of whether and how volunteering in village life and individual perceptions of liveability are interrelated. Thus, the importance of the availability of opportunities to volunteer in village social life as a determinant of perceived liveability, and variations in perceptions of liveability in terms of voluntary activity among different groups of residents, are investigated.

In Chapter 6, the final chapter, insights from the previous chapters are brought together to draw general conclusions relating to the study’s main objective of exploring the relationship between different types of village attachment and residents’ willingness to become actively engaged in village life. This chapter provides new insights on the potential and limitations of the participation society in rural areas. Furthermore, problems facing policymakers working to improve liveability and the quality of life in villages are identified. Based on the theoretical and empirical insights emerging from this study, recommendations for facilitating the creation of more sustainable village societies are presented. Additionally, this chapter includes reflections on the data and methodological procedures that underpin the thesis as well as suggestions for further research.
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References


