A place for life or a place to live
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Chapter 6

Conclusion
6.1. Introduction

With advances in (digital) mobility and technology, there are now increased opportunities for people living in north-western European countries to live in specific residential areas that best match their self-chosen lifestyles. This phenomenon has led to an influx of new residents into the countryside, often motivated by the desire to live their own version of the ‘rural idyll’. This notion usually pertains to a romanticised area that has little crime and nuisance, high levels of contact among neighbours, a high quality natural living environment and spacious houses, while still affording access to urban services (Halfacree, 1995; Van Dam et al., 2002). Other groups of in-migrants may have decided to move to the countryside to be near family and friends or because of the availability of cheap housing (Stockdale, 2015; Bijker et al., 2012). The influx of new rural residents has created a more heterogeneous rural population in which residents have diverse needs and wants relating to the immediate living environment. To better understand this variation within present-day rural contexts, mobility (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Halfacree, 2012) and selective/elective belonging (Savage, 2005, 2010; Watt, 2009) frameworks were theoretically integrated within this thesis. This integration enabled an exploration of present-day variations in village attachment, volunteering and perceptions of liveability. Further, this study is situated within a wider policy debate on the implementation of the participation society in rural areas. Consequently, it is important to develop an understanding of what the village actually means to diverse groups of residents and to what extent they are motivated to become active in village life. Integrating research on village attachment and volunteering necessitated a more empirically driven research approach to explore the potential and limitations of the participation society in rural areas.

Variations in village attachment (Chapter 2) as well as the contribution of facilities to social attachment (Chapter 3) were investigated in order to develop an understanding of how contemporary rural residents are attached to their living environments. The different types of village attachment that were identified constituted a starting point for studying residents’ willingness to volunteer (Chapter 4). A mix of quantitative approaches was used for these analyses. The first three chapters entailed analyses using data from an extensive nationwide database that enabled the formulation of general statements on the existence of various types of village attachments and how these are related to the availability
of facilities and the willingness of residents to volunteer. A second smaller database was employed for assessing relations between opportunities to volunteer and perceived liveability in a Dutch province (Chapter 5).

This concluding chapter presents reflections on the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 and highlights the main findings from Chapters 2 to 5. This is followed by reflections on the wider implications of these findings that offer further insights on the meaning of community, volunteering and facilities in present-day rural societies in the Netherlands. Next, avenues for further research are identified, followed by a discussion on methodological issues and the use of large datasets in rural studies. The chapter ends with some concluding thoughts on the challenges confronting rural areas in the near future.

6.2. Main findings

Chapter 2 addresses the following question: What types of contemporary village attachment can be distinguished in Dutch rural areas? With advancing technology and mobility, rural residents are becoming less dependent on their local environments and have more opportunities to choose the degrees and forms of their village attachments. This phenomenon applies to in-migrants as well as village-born residents. Based on the degrees of residents’ social, functional, cultural and environmental attachments, a typology of contemporary types of village attachment was established in this chapter. The results of the latent class analysis demonstrate meaningful variation in contemporary village attachments. Despite the increase in mobility, the findings of this chapter show that the majority of present-day rural inhabitants still report high levels of village attachment. In particular, the social and environmental dimensions of place attachment emerged as the most important indicators of village attachment. Residents with a longer duration of residence were overrepresented within the category of those with strong village attachments. However, this relationship is far from absolute. A weak degree of village attachment was found among a substantial number of village-born residents, whereas rural in-migrants also reported high levels of village attachment.

Furthermore, the differentiation of the social dimension of place attachment into two sub-dimensions (local contacts and social orientation) turned out to be meaningful. This finding indicates that a proportion of rural residents, mostly in-migrants, combine an outward social orientation with a large number of local
contacts. This is an important finding, as it reveals that an outward orientation does not necessarily exclude active involvement in local networks as is often assumed. Further, two groups of residents reported below average attachments to their villages. Some of them appear to have made a conscious decision to live an autonomous lifestyle away from the village community, whereas others seem to have an uneasy attachment to their village attributed to involuntary residence in the countryside. Young residents were overrepresented in this latter category. Last, some residents were found to be unilaterally attached to the village’s environmental qualities. This finding seems to confirm the notion of residents in search of an independent, quiet and peaceful life away from village social life.

Following this exploration of contemporary variations in village attachments, Chapter 3 focused on the context in which village attachment develops, addressing the question of the extent to which the availability of village facilities contributes to residents’ social place attachment. Assuming that alternative facilities are available in neighbouring villages and cities, most residents no longer have to rely on locally available facilities for their primary functions. This implies that they are less used, which is one reason why many village facilities have closed in the last few decades. However, as village facilities often serve as meeting places, there are fears that their decline may negatively impact on social place attachment. This chapter revealed that a positive relation exists between the presence of cafés and supermarkets and social attachment, suggesting that these facilities contribute significantly to social attachment for a section of residents. However, a reverse causal relationship may exist. In villages where residents have strong social attachments, facilities may have more customers, leading to better chances of survival.

Contrary to common expectations, community centres, primary schools and sports facilities were not found to be related to social place attachment, making it unlikely that their availability would contribute significantly to social place attachment. Moreover, the availability of a primary school was found to have a negative effect on social attachment, suggesting that the presence of a school may even hinder the social dimension of village attachment. A possible reason for this unexpected finding is that a school provides a meeting place only for a certain section of families in the village, whereas village activities and social relationships in the absence of a primary school are more inclusive, encompassing all members of a village community. The conclusion of this chapter was that the availability of
village facilities is not a necessary condition for social attachment. A possible reason for the meagre contributions of village facilities to social attachment is that the social functions of village facilities are losing relevance, assuming that they had these functions in the first place. Although social contact occurs within local facilities, their availability does not necessarily contribute to making new contacts. Hence, alternative meeting places, such as local festivities, digital meeting places, meetings in the public space and facilities in neighbouring villages, are equally suitable for fostering local contacts.

Based on the findings of Chapter 2, and according to the theory of elective belonging, it can be assumed that a general and all-encompassing attachment to the village is increasingly being replaced by more selective and individualised forms of attachment. Thus, it is important to examine how general and selective forms of place attachment are predictive of voluntary citizen activity within various local clubs and organisations. The main aim of Chapter 4 was to address this question. Involvement in village life is not self-evident, which raises concerns about whether a decline in general attachment and shared emotional identification with a village would weaken residents’ motivations for becoming actively involved in village life. In line with the theory of elective belonging, which posits that residents have increased freedom of choice to move to places that meet their personal lifestyle demands, this chapter showed that relationships between selective forms of attachment and volunteering are substantive. In particular, the number of local social contacts is strongly predictive of volunteering, whereas cultural and environmental attachments only result in activities related to those specific forms of attachment. A general attachment to the village, as a whole, only explains volunteering to a limited extent. Thus, the decreasing impact of a shared general attachment to the village does not necessarily pose a problem, mainly because residents with high levels of social attachment, including recent immigrants, actively volunteer. Hence, in a village where residents have access to an extensive local social network, volunteering rates are expected to remain high. The assumption that residents with a general attachment volunteer as a matter of course is not correct. Present-day rural residents may not volunteer out of love for the village as a whole; rather, they may do so because of their selective attachment to specific aspects of the village. Future efforts to strengthen local communities should take into account the heterogeneous ways in which residents are attached to their villages in order to stimulate local volunteering.
Chapter 5 addressed the questions of whether different groups of rural residents perceive the availability of opportunities to volunteer in village social life as a significant determinant of liveability and how differences in voluntary activity affect perceptions of liveability. The relationship between volunteering and perceived liveability has gained increasing importance, because the participation society operates under the assumption that citizens would willingly participate in various aspects of community life on a voluntary basis to keep their village liveable. Although the majority of respondents were active at some level in village life, the availability of opportunities to volunteer in village social life was not found to be an important determinant of perceived liveability. Consequently, this chapter highlighted the fact that not all residents perceive opportunities to volunteer as an important part of rural living. Further, non-active residents were found to have different needs and desires relating to the residential area compared with active residents. This first group of residents may be highly satisfied with their lives in the countryside without being actively involved in village life. This finding is in agreement with the view that villages are becoming solely 'residential areas' where people live in a green and spacious environment and may have good contact with their neighbours, while spending the majority of their time outside the village for professional or social reasons. Affordable and well-organised modes of transportation are an important determinant of liveability for the group of non-active residents. This situation contrasts with that of the latter group of active participants whose job satisfaction is predictive of high levels of perceived liveability.

6.3. Discussion

6.3.1. New rural collectives

The introduction of the participation society has resulted in a strong policy emphasis on rural volunteering and citizens' initiatives. Based on the underlying assumption that present-day rural residents are attached to their living environments, local governments promote a culture of self-reliance and community activity. However, classic views on village attachment postulate that communities are either 'lost' (Simmel, 1971) or 'liberated' (Wellman & Leighton, 1979) from their immediate living environments. Within such communities, residents are believed to have a tenuous shared general attachment to the village, weak social relationships and low degrees of local participation. Following this
line of reasoning, questions could be raised as to whether the participation society is sustainable. However, current theoretical insights highlight the continued attachment of present-day rural residents to their villages and their surroundings. Savage et al. (2005, 2010) and Watt (2009) argued that increased mobility and freedom of choice result in improved opportunities for residents to move to places that match their self-chosen lifestyles and personal wishes. As a consequence, a large proportion of present-day rural residents have made well-informed decisions to live in the countryside, choosing to attach to specific aspects of the village (Benson & Jackson, 2012).

In this thesis, empirical evidence substantiates the abovementioned theoretical arguments. Although villagers have become less dependent on their immediate spatial contexts, the findings of this thesis reveal that a large proportion of present-day rural residents report some sort of selective or other attachment to the village (Chapters 2 and 4). In addition to a highly valued attachment to the environment, the majority of rural residents, both in-migrants and village-born residents, have access to a considerable number of local contacts and social networks within the village, which they combine with outward social and professional orientations. This suggests that while villages have remained socially cohesive on the whole, rural communities are being transformed from close-knit groups of residents with strong family and friendship ties into loose-knit collections of residents whose social ties are centred on shared interests in relation to specific aspects of village life. Although traditional communities have not completely disappeared, various loose-knit collectives of residents are expected to increasingly replace traditional village communities.

Three characteristic features of contemporary loose-knit village collectives contrast with those of traditional close-knit village communities. First, a multitude of diverse and loose-knit groups of residents can co-exist within the same village. Some rural collectives comprise just a few residents, for instance those pursuing fast broadband internet connections, practising a hobby or campaigning to preserve threatened facilities. Residents can be members of multiple loose-knit collectives at the same time, and mutual interests among rural collectives occasionally result in joint place-making projects or citizens’ initiatives. The establishment of a community centre, for instance, appeals to a large number of residents. Second, the existence of loose-knit local collectives would explain why in-migrants can integrate into their new living environments relatively quickly.
The increased freedom of choice provides villagers with more opportunities to connect with fellow like-minded residents in ways that fit best with their self-chosen lifestyles (Chapter 4; see also Lammerts & Doğan, 2004). The idea that rural in-migrants remain aloof from community life and are hardly involved in local social networks is therefore not supported by the findings of this thesis (Chapter 2). In fact, after a number of years of residence, long-term in-migrants do not differ significantly from village-born residents in terms of their local contacts (Chapter 4). Third, present-day village collectives are more outwardly oriented than traditional communities. The majority of rural residents have friends and acquaintances who mostly live outside the village (Vermeij, 2015). In particular, those residents who combine a local social network with an outward orientation are expected to have good access to outside resources and capital and may therefore play a key role in local place-making processes (McCulloch et al., 2012).

The emergence of new types of rural collectives has consequences for local processes of solidarity-building. Many in-migrants may not unquestioningly perceive volunteering as a part of village social life; rather, they may choose to volunteer, motivated by their personal interests and lifestyles (Holmes, 2014). This could mean that traditional forms of local solidarity will gradually disappear within loose-knit village collectives. This raises concerns regarding a number of elderly residents who used to actively volunteer in village life in line with traditional social norms and duties but who may not receive similar forms of reciprocal solidarity from fellow residents when they start to rely on them (Greider et al., 1991). Because neighbourhood support cannot be taken for granted, long-term village residents may experience problems relating to their personal wellbeing at an older age. Also, differences that relate to demands and requirements regarding the living environment occasionally surface. Thus, in many villages, discussions are held on whether the local supermarket should be allowed to stay open on Sundays or whether a local entrepreneur should be allowed to build a wind turbine near the village.2 Opinions regarding the future of the primary school provide a good example of how a traditional village facility can

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be the cause of a dispute arising between residents who want to preserve the village school and those who are indifferent about this issue (Chapter 3).

Local governments and village councils may play an important role in facilitating and stimulating collaborations between residents with different types of attachments and interests. Through the organisation of consultation events or the drafting of ‘village visions’, residents can be encouraged to find mutual interests that eventually lead to more dialogue among them. Such dialogues enable policymakers to acquire a better grasp of how to improve village liveability. The concept of liveability is often described as ‘fuzzy’, because it is not always easy to understand how the rural living environment fits the requirements of various collectives of residents (Chapter 5). Perhaps the observation by Ruth and Franklin (2014) that liveability is hard to achieve for all residents is close to the truth. The disappearance of traditional and close-knit village communities makes it harder to find common interests and desires among diverse collectives of village residents, if these even existed in the first place. Therefore, policymakers are cautioned against using the concept of liveability as a catch-all phrase conveying a generic, village-wide opinion. The concept of liveability has not been widely applied within academic research, but it may increasingly appeal to researchers because of its ability to capture the diverse needs and wants of present-day residents regarding the immediate living environment.

6.3.2. Vitality through social qualities

In the likely event that governments will continue to withdraw from their original roles vis-à-vis rural communities, the pressure on rural communities to become more self-reliant will increase further. This suggests that more of the responsibility for safeguarding village liveability will be delegated to residents, although in practice, village collectives, the government and professionals will largely continue to collaborate (Salemink et al., 2016). The finding that social place attachment, in particular, is predictive of volunteering indicates that the role of the perceived social characteristics of rural collectives requires further attention (Chapter 4). A social component is important in present-day voluntarism, which makes it likely that many individuals are seeking ways to meet and interact with fellow residents through volunteering. Following the theory of elective belonging,

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3 Verdwijnen school Ransdaal leidt tot protest (Closure of Ransdaal School leads to protest), 10-5-2016. www.1limburg.nl.
it is plausible that a transition from general and all-encompassing village attachment to selective forms of village attachment may not necessarily result in less volunteering. As long as residents are involved in one or more local collectives, it is expected that volunteering rates will remain high. Conversely, citizens’ initiatives to establish collective facilities, such as energy or healthcare cooperatives, in villages that do not have socially engaged communities may prove difficult.

Despite their increasing mobility and outward orientation, most present-day residents do volunteer in village social life (Posthumus et al., 2013; Steenbekkers & Vermeij, 2013). In particular, residents living in villages with socially cohesive and engaged communities are expected to be motivated to undertake voluntary tasks. Although this proposition is reassuring, two concerns nevertheless arise regarding the potential of volunteering in rural areas. First, rural residents do not consider the availability of opportunities to be an important determinant of liveability. Satisfaction with other aspects of place, such as leisure opportunities and the quality of the neighbourhood, is more strongly associated with perceptions of liveability (Chapter 5). This finding could imply that most rural residents do not volunteer with the aim of improving the overall quality of their villages; rather, they do so because of personal interests and desires. Residents’ increased freedom of choice relating to their involvement in village life could indicate that they are less committed to carrying out voluntary tasks. Second, as residents do not primarily participate out of feelings of solidarity with the village, there is a risk of their sudden withdrawal or loss of interest, which threatens the progress of large-scale and enduring initiatives. Therefore, simple transference of tasks from the local government to the village community may not always have the desired effect. Residents can be expected to be selective and inconsistent in the voluntary tasks that they wish to engage in.

Additionally, present-day rural residents may opt for an erratic style of volunteering. Another development that hinders the implementation of the participation society in rural areas is the choice of a section of residents not to become active in village life (Chapter 5). The decision not to participate could be seen as a valid and legitimate choice (Shortall, 2008). The particular interest of these residents may be to live an autonomous life in a nice rural neighbourhood that is green and safe, while maintaining good connections with other areas (Chapter 5). In general, these ‘consumers’ of the countryside tend to be very...
satisfied with their living environment. This group of non-active residents may be indifferent towards the survival of traditional village facilities and may feel incidentally that the presence of facilities disturbs their peaceful and quiet living environment (Chapters 4 and 5). A potential risk of non-volunteering is that highly skilled and socially engaged residents gain a dominant position in a participation society, and care has to be taken to ensure that the voices of other residents are not disregarded. This understanding is important for preventing the creation of social cleavages within a village, for instance between active and non-active residents. Another consequence of allocating more responsibilities to residents is that village councils and citizens’ initiatives do not always represent all village residents' interests within negotiations.

The introduction of the participation society has caused a shift in relations between local governments and residents. Consequently, local governments are required to become more flexible institutions that encourage and facilitate promising citizens’ initiatives. A practical example of how this transition could work is demonstrated by a citizens’ initiative in the village of Rimburg, which was aimed at establishing a volunteer-led bus service in order to compensate for the loss of public transport. This project was successfully run by volunteers with a small subsidy obtained from the local government and contributed to meeting local mobility needs. By supporting local initiatives in a constructive way, the negative consequences of volunteering, such as ‘volunteer burn-out’ or volunteers starting to feel frustrated by governmental interventions, can be alleviated. However, local governments and civic workers are not always equipped for their new role as facilitators. For example, local governments often expect citizens’ initiatives to comply with existing policy regulations. This kind of government interference may slow down the progress of an initiative and even hamper residents in continuing with their initiative, dampening their initial enthusiasm (Uitermark, 2015; Salemink & Strijker, 2015). Hence, it is important for local governments to accept that in the context of the participation society, not all

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4 Overlast voor omwonenden door laden en lossen LIDL Heythuysen (Residents experience nuisance because of deliveries to LIDL supermarket Heythuysen), 18-5-2013. www.ronduitopen.nl.

5 De Limburger, Rimburg niet langer verstoken van openbaar vervoer (Rimburg no longer without public transport), 9-6-2017.
residents are interested in participating in village life. Nor should they try to bring citizens’ initiatives compulsorily into line with an existing policy framework.

In villages with ageing populations, local governments and policymakers may wish to stimulate social cohesion proactively among villagers in order to create self-reliant villages. It is important that frail elderly residents continue to have access to a local social network on which they can rely if necessary. Whereas the majority of mobile residents can live their lives relatively independently regarding the provision of governmental services, vulnerable people become increasingly dependent on others. Policies on ageing in place emphasise that individuals should be allowed to grow old within residences (homes and communities) of their choice that are familiar and secure for as long as they are able to do so. This also suggests that for a number of older and vulnerable rural residents, meeting opportunities within the village and support offered by other villagers can be necessary conditions for a self-sustaining life. Governments are therefore expected to play an active role in creating a liveable environment that is adapted to the needs and demands of an older population. Ruth and Franklin (2014) have referred to this approach as a ‘life course perspective’ of liveability, emphasising that needs and preferences vary between younger and older age cohorts.

6.3.3. New residents, new social infrastructure

The finding that locally available village facilities do not seem to enhance social attachment indicates that these facilities are losing their function as common meeting places, assuming that they had such a function in the first place. It is widely thought that facilities have an important social function as places where residents can meet and interact with each other (Miller, 1993; Clarke & Banga, 2010; Roberts & Townshend, 2013; Svendsen, 2010; Spaaij, 2009). It was found that from the perspective of villagers, facilities and services do not contribute significantly to the perception of liveability (Chapter 5), and that in villages without facilities residents are also able to establish social contacts (Chapter 3). Although a section of residents rely on traditional facilities to maintain social contacts, eventually mourning their disappearance, the social importance of locally available facilities for the majority of residents should not be overestimated. This applies especially to rural areas where alternative facilities are available within a short driving distance. Other types of meeting places are
becoming increasingly important for meetings and interactions between people. These include online meeting venues, facilities in neighbouring villages or cities, meetings in public space and village events. Villages without traditional facilities can therefore be equally liveable and socially cohesive compared with villages with facilities.

The finding that the availability of facilities is not an important determinant of perceived liveability seems to confirm the notion that most residents are highly mobile and no longer need to rely on the provision of local services. However, this does not necessarily mean that facilities have become redundant in all village areas. To some extent, the symbolic functions of facilities can still be important, as mobile residents can become concerned about specific facilities if these facilities dovetail with their self-elected lifestyle and are appropriate for ‘someone like me’ (Savage, 2010; p. 132; Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017).

Visits to local pubs, community centres and sports clubs can therefore be based on well-informed decisions and may be an integral part of living the ‘rural idyll’ (Markham & Bosworth, 2016). If this is the case, residents may not mind spending more money in local facilities in order to keep them viable. This suggests that in the near future, local service provision will be adapted to meet the wants of present-day rural populations. Experiments have already been conducted entailing local residents’ collective ownership of a specific facility that they believe is important for their village, such as a café or supermarket. The availability of a village facility may therefore be a consequence of local social attachment rather than the other way around. This could result in more diversity among villages in terms of their services and facilities and the types of people they appeal to. In some villages, communities prefer to maintain services and facilities adjusted to the needs and wants of elderly residents. Other villages are more appealing to families with children due to the availability of sports facilities and playgrounds, and still others, for example ecovillages, reflect the desire to preserve a specific set of facilities associated with a societal movement. Villages with low levels of social cohesion are, however, particularly vulnerable to the closure of facilities.

The limited importance of village facilities in fostering social attachment suggests that residents are able to create alternative ways of meeting and interacting with

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6 De Volkskrant, Kroeg failliet? Dan kopen we die toch met het hele dorp (Café bankrupt? Let the village buy it), 29-5-2017.
each other. This is an indication that other more contemporary types of meeting places are taking over the social role of village facilities. It is therefore helpful to better understand how, for example, village festivals, events or digital citizen platforms affect social attachment and community connectedness. The closure of many traditional meeting places, such as cafés, primary schools and community centres, could lead to a temporary revival of community spirit aimed at establishing new village symbols and meeting places (Oncescu & Giles, 2014). This could explain the current popularity of local music festivals and farmers’ markets in the Dutch countryside. Experiments entailing the establishment of digital village collectives are also attracting substantial media coverage. Many inhabitants of Loon, a small village located in the northern part of the Netherlands, have, for instance, joined village WhatsApp groups with the aim of quickly sharing information. These new types of digital communication platform are often bottom-up, entailing low monetary costs, which could explain why they are relatively successful at uniting village residents. Such initiatives are generally encouraged by local governments, but because residents themselves run these new types of digital meeting places, they are well able to adapt them to the shared needs and requirements of present-day village populations. Consequently, through processes of trial and error, the most effective ones are expected to endure.

6.4. Methodological issues

Through its focus on residents’ attachment, volunteering and perceptions of liveability, this thesis has advanced understanding of the meaning of the countryside in the lives of the present-day rural population. This was accomplished using diverse methodological approaches within the field of rural geography. Thus, this thesis responds to Smith’s (2007) call for more quantitative analyses of contemporary patterns of rural change. Latent class analysis (Chapter 2) and structural equation modelling (Chapter 3) are examples of second
generation methods of statistical analysis. Because statistical programs, such as MPlus and LISREL, are slowly becoming more user-friendly, it is expected that in the near future, an increasing number of researchers will discover the benefits of using these more advanced types of statistical analysis. However, both of the abovementioned statistical methods require large sample sizes. The SVP’14 database contains data on over 7,800 residents of small villages (< 3,000 inhabitants), thus enabling the performance of advanced statistical analyses. Consequently, valid and reliable statements can be made that apply to the wider rural population.

Latent class analysis conducted for this study enabled unmeasured class membership among rural residents to be identified using continuous observed attachment variables. Thus, residents’ self-reported village attachments (observations) could be categorised into different types of village attachment (latent classes). Furthermore, one of the benefits of applying structural equation analysis is that it allows for the inclusion of latent variables within an empirical model. Social place attachment is a good example of a latent variable, and more reliable and informative results were obtained by assigning different weights to all items that measured the latent variable. A large number of known personal and village characteristics were also included as control variables, which led to more reliable determination of the unique effect of the core independent variables on the dependent variables.

As with all research, the data underpinning this study also had their limitations. First, the data did not allow for longitudinal research. Because data collection was conducted at a single point in time (autumn 2014), it was not possible to obtain empirical evidence on how residents’ attachment may have changed over time. Such changes have basically been assumed in the theoretical (cf. Savage, 2010; Halfacree, 2012) and popular scientific (Mak, 2001) literatures. However, repeated cross-sectional surveys are needed to empirically validate these assumptions. Second, the cross-sectional data did not allow for unequivocal conclusions regarding cause and effect. Multiple interpretations are possible, for instance on the relationship between facilities and social attachment. The availability of village facilities could be the result as well as the cause of social place attachment. Third, another drawback of using existing databases is that there is little room for manoeuvre if a variable does not fully capture the meaning of a theoretical construct. Some flexibility in the process of operationalising
specific constructs was therefore required. For instance, the scales used to operationalise different dimensions of place attachment were slightly different compared with those commonly used in the environmental psychology literature. In the latter field of study, measurement scales usually reflect the perceived importance of specific aspects of place for respondents (cf. Scannell & Gifford, 2010), whereas respondents in this study were asked to indicate the extent of their local social ties and involvement in village culture in order to calculate the strength of their social and cultural attachments, respectively.

6.5. Suggestions for further research

This thesis has provided new insights on contemporary forms of village attachment and how these impact on volunteering as well as how liveability is evaluated by present-day rural residents. These insights were obtained using two quantitative datasets. Several research questions were answered, but new research questions have also been raised. Although the participation society requires rural residents to become increasingly committed to and active within their villages, systematic research has not been conducted on changing rural lifestyles and motivations to volunteer, which remain largely unexamined research topics. Because inclusive and socially engaged communities have been found to offer the best guarantee of residents’ active involvement in village life, three pathways are proposed for pursuing further inquiries regarding villages’ social qualities within the context of the participation society.

First, a finding of this study was that while rural residents within the small sample carried out voluntary work in the village, most of the active volunteers were the least satisfied with village liveability (Chapter 5). Could this be attributed to residents having a keen eye for everything that is wrong within a village as a result of working hard in order to maintain its social and environmental quality? Or does a small group of active residents become overburdened as they feel that they have no choice but to volunteer in order to keep things going? The volatile nature of volunteering may put a considerable amount of pressure on a small group of very active residents. In this context, it becomes increasingly important to inquire into what motivates very active residents to volunteer and whether they are motivated to volunteer as a result of either a lack of choice or freedom of choice. A more equal distribution of voluntary tasks could reduce the negative side effects of volunteering. However, this also suggests that more knowledge is needed to
assess whether and how non-active and less active residents can be persuaded to become more involved in village community life. Although a number of residents are simply not interested in becoming active in village life, social barriers and exclusion could also be reasons why a section of residents does not participate in village life (see Tonts, 2005). This raises the question of whether stronger integration within a village collective is in fact hindered by some sort of perceived social barrier.

Second, this thesis has revealed that the availability of facilities does not necessarily result in higher levels of social attachment and social cohesion. Therefore, investing in the maintenance of locally available facilities may not be the best way to create more socially engaged communities. However, as previously argued, new types of village facilities and services have emerged due to the increased diversity of present-day village populations in terms of incomes, backgrounds, lifestyles and demands. A topic that has not been addressed in this thesis is how these new types of village social infrastructure emerge. Do new meeting places replace old meeting places or can they co-exist side by side? And how do meeting places, such as village festivals, facilities outside the village and digital village platforms, affect social place attachment? Further, to what extent are these new structures inclusive of all residents, and what is the role of digital or other technology in reforming traditional village life? In other words, village culture is undergoing a rapid transition, but the direction is not clear. It is recommended that future research focus on the question of how village collectives create new forms of social cohesion and attachment by deploying innovative methods of meeting and interacting (both digital and other).

Third, this thesis helps researchers exploring place attachment to extend their inquiries to examine what it means to be socially attached to a place. Other studies have drawn a distinction between the physical and social qualities of a place (e.g. Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001). However, the sub-categorisation of social attachment into two dimensions (the number of local social contacts and social orientation) proposed in this study has not been applied previously. This thesis shows that such a distinction is meaningful (Chapter 2). An active engagement with local social life does not have to exclude a strong outward social orientation. It is important that this distinction is recognised by researchers, because it clarifies that an active local social life does not occur at the expense of a strong outward orientation. Also, it shows that specific individuals...
can play a leading role in village societies as they have access to both village organisational skills and outside resources and capital. Further studies conducted on the geographical distribution of social capital in rural areas may help to explain why some villages thrive and other villages face marginalisation in the context of the participation society.

6.6. Concluding remarks

So far, general living conditions in Dutch rural areas have been found to be very satisfactory (see RIGO/Atlas for municipalities, 2013). However, two major challenges may threaten the quality of life in the coming decades. First, the absolute and relative numbers of elderly inhabitants in Dutch rural areas are increasing substantially. Ageing rural residents do not always feel that their village still accommodates their needs in their old age (Winterton & Warburton, 2011). Not only the disappearance of locally available facilities, but also the decline of the local community may spark feelings of loss among older residents. A section of older rural residents grew up in a village in which an active role within village life, based on shared social norms, conventions and goals, was prescribed within traditional forms of village organisation. Nowadays, older residents cannot be sure whether they can rely on their fellow residents for help with their daily activities. The threat of an imbalance arising between those who rely on care and those who are able to provide care is apparent, especially in fringe areas (Van den Broek et al., 2016). Second, rural development is uneven, and some rural areas run the risk of marginalisation (Bock, 2016). It was anticipated that advances in digital technology and mobility would blur the physical and mental boundaries between urban and rural areas across north-western Europe. Although this has happened in some rural areas, elsewhere, mostly in peripheral areas, the urban-rural divide has widened across and within countries. Due to unfavourable socioeconomic and political connections and a selective flow of outmigration, spatial differences may foster processes of social inequality, exclusion and population decline, thus contributing to rural marginalisation.

In order to cope with the abovementioned rural challenges, residents cannot always appeal to a reticent government to take the lead in village development. Irrespective of the direction of village development, the determinants and importance of village attachment in contemporary rural societies have been demonstrated and emphasised in this thesis. Other studies show that residents
with strong and varied attachments to a place are more resilient to the impacts of change (Smith et al., 2012) and indicate higher levels of individual wellbeing (Theodori, 2001). As villages have to become more self-reliant in line with the current neoliberal policy orientation, it becomes increasingly important for village residents to remain engaged in a constant dialogue. This will provide them with improved opportunities to establish new forms of caring and living involving technical innovations, depending on local needs and capacities. Regular contact and good social relations among residents are therefore pivotal to guarantee a living environment in which all rural residents, regardless of age and geography, express high levels of satisfaction. Sterksel, described in Chapter 1, provides a good example of a village in which an active village community supports a wide array of functions. The dominant picture that emerges from this thesis is one of a countryside that is open to the notion of a society that assigns a greater role to its residents. For most residents, the countryside is likely to remain a pleasant place to live in. However, to maintain a high quality rural living environment, residents will have to take greater responsibility, working together in order to meet their collective needs. In this process, governments should ensure that the needs and wants of vulnerable people are also being met.
References


