

# NO PLACE LIKE A SMALL HOME:

Older People's Attachment to rural Localities

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## Abstract

*Attachment of older people to their homes can take many forms. According to the Dutch National Institute for Social Research (SCP) four kinds of attachment are relevant in dwellers in outlying areas and villages: functional, social, cultural, and landscape attachment. For people that age in smaller rural villages attachment may form a trade-off with living in good health and safety, when availability of local services and support declines. Therefore, it is important to gain insight in older people's perspectives on attachment to their habitat. To that purpose a narrative analysis of 42 interviews was conducted in seven smaller villages within the Dutch municipality of Overbetuwe. Results indicate the satisfaction of inhabitants, their acceptance of their vulnerability, and the importance of their self-reliance as main themes. Comparing with the SCP study leads to the conclusion: older people in smaller villages in Overbetuwe fear future developments.*

## Keywords

Older people; attachment; rural localities; physical scale of villages; self-reliance

## Introduction

Attachment of people to their dwelling spaces can take many forms. Whereas people are generally not indifferent towards their local environment, having a sense of belonging to the place where you live can be seen as a fundamental aspect of living a life of human dignity, which fulfils a basic psychological need. In a study entitled "Close to home, Local bond and commitment of inhabitants of villages" the Dutch National Institute for Social Research (Vermeij & Steenbekkers, 2015) investigated a sample of 6,888 respondents aged 15 years and older, dwelling in 222 outlying areas and 516 villages with fewer than 3,000 residents. The findings indicated four distinct types of attachment of an inhabitant with regard to his or her village: functional attachment, social attachment, and cultural attachment and landscape attachment. These attachment types form important considerations for older people in choosing their dwelling.

It may be contended that for older people that age in their own homes in smaller rural villages attachment and feeling at home may form some kind of trade-off with actually being able to live a life in good health and safe from harm, because local services and support are generally declining in these areas. Thus, health considerations and lack of actual support or services may force an older person to move in spite of the attachment experienced. This in itself can be viewed as a decline in wellbeing as it narrows down the realistic options to live the life they have reason to value (see Sen, 2001). Therefore, it is important to gain more insight in older people's perspectives on wellbeing in terms of their social attachment to their habitat.

In order to assess these perspectives from an integral people-centered point of view it is useful to apply the conceptual framework of the Capabilities Approach (CA) originating in the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (for an overview see Sen, 2001; Nussbaum, 2000, 2009). In the CA the effective opportunities people have to lead the lives they have reason to value (Robeyns,

2006), also referred to as their capabilities, form the basic materials for the assessment of wellbeing, equality and justice. Well-being is operationalized as the degree to which a person is able to self-actualize. This leads to a people-centred framework as people and the lives they want to lead are regarded as ends in themselves. Thus, according to the CA what is of value should always be considered a personal affair and is therefore pluralistic as what is valuable can ultimately only be determined by the individual which may differ substantially across individuals. Moreover, the CA distinguishes between fundamental freedoms (or capabilities) of a person to establish the life she values, and the actual realization of those freedoms in functionings. In this way, a person's capabilities determines the entire set of realistic options for any person, from which she chooses the preferred ones. Thus, a fundamental tenet of the CA is that free choice is essential for people to convert their capabilities into functionings. However, in this process of conversion three types of factors limit or expand the number and type of capability options (Robeyns, 2006): First, *personal* conversion factors pertain to individual characteristics such as bodily health, psychological character or personal disadvantages. Second, *environmental* conversion factors pertain to mechanisms originating in the physical surroundings of the person. Third, *social* conversion factors refer to all social structures and relations in an individual life. Although a more precise account of the CA involves other concepts and mechanisms, in short, the CA embeds human agency and self-determination in a process which allows for an integral assessment of personal and contextual influences on well-being.

In the present study, we explore the relation between wellbeing and housing factors. Put in terms of concepts from the CA, this can be described as: the influence of the physical and social characteristics of dwelling spaces in rural areas on the process by which people can successfully convert their capabilities into functionings, i.e. achieve a certain wellbeing state. *This paper focuses on the influence of the physical scale of the village (population size) on the self-reliance of the inhabitants.* For the above purpose, insight in the enabling functions of the physical and social environments as viewed by the person itself is essential. The personal characteristics as age and household composition and functional, social, cultural and landscape attachments are mediating variables as they are to be considered personal and environmental conversion factors.

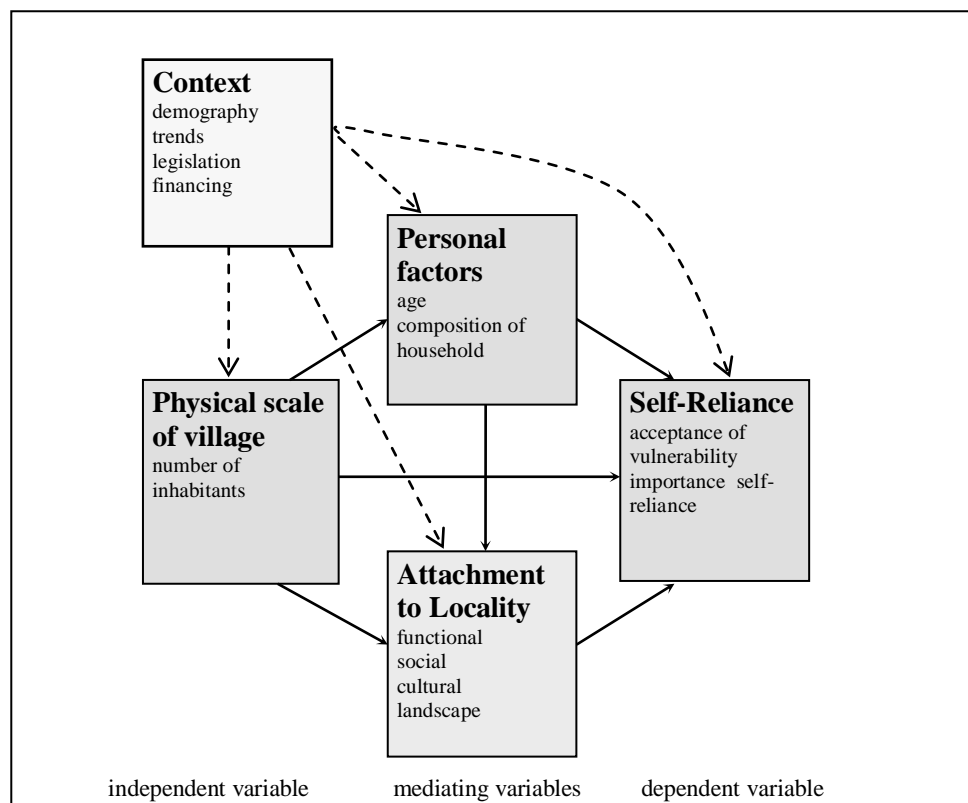


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the present study with interactions between independent, mediating and dependent variables.

With regard to village scale a distinction can be made between physical scale, structural scale, and mental scale (Spierings, 2014; van Zijp, 1997). Physical scaling occurs when a change takes place in the scale of social and spatial units. Structural scaling is the changing process of individual and social systems. Mental scaling is a change in the emotional bond between the members and the group as a whole. Thus, changes in village scale can be seen as influencing different spheres of human life depending on the nature of the scale change. The purpose of the present research was to shed light on influence of scaling on the wellbeing process. A conceptual model of the relevant variables is shown schematically in Figure 1. In order to assess their perspectives narrative interviews were conducted with older people living in rural areas in which scaling has occurred.

## Method

### *Sample area and respondents*

The current study was conducted in seven smaller villages within the Dutch municipality of Overbetuwe, see Figure 2, and focuses on the technical and social needs of older people with respect to aging at home. These seven villages house between 188 and 5.051 inhabitants each, which for the study were classified as either small (2000-5000 inhabitants), or very small (<2000 inhabitants). In the study the differences in results for the three age categories 60-69, 70-79 and 80+ were contrasted.

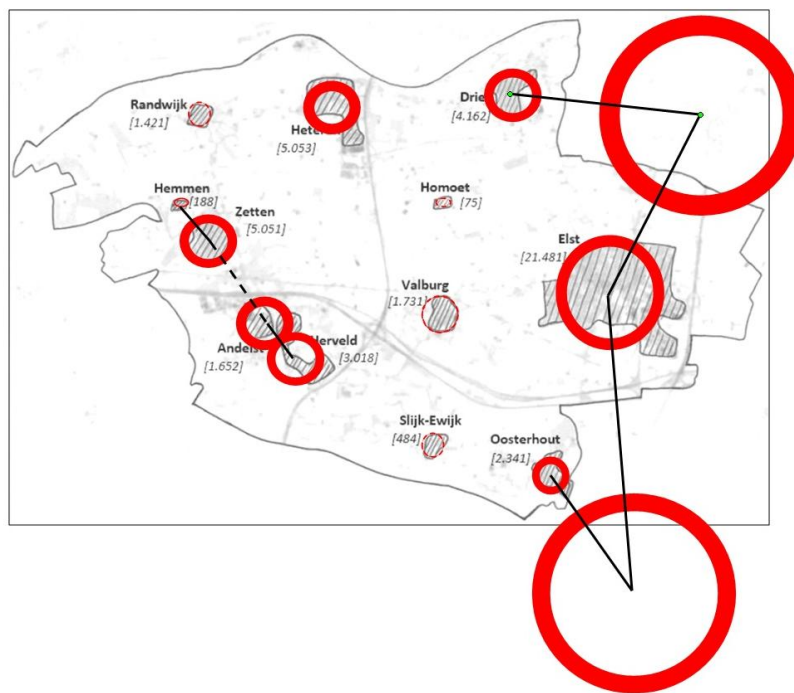


Figure 2. Research Area with small and very small villages next to two cities

Table 1 Researched Villages in sets of physical scale

Village	Number of Inhabitants	Number of respondents		Sets of physical scale
Hemmen	188	1	15	Very small villages
Slijk-Ewijk	484	3		
Andelst	1.652	7		
Valburg	1.731	4		
Oosterhout	2.340	8	39	Small villages
Herveld	3.018	7		
Zetten	5.051	24		

First an environmental analysis was performed according to the DESTEP methodology yielding information on demography, economy, socio-cultural aspects, technology, ecology and political-legal aspects (Aquilar, 1967; Oxford Learning Lab, 2012).

This formed the basis for a narrative analysis of 42 in-depth interviews with local aging dwellers (van Biene, et al., 2008). The sample was stratified for age group, gender, distance to the city, and scale of the village. 15 couples were interviewed, and 27 singles. The analysis is based on 40 interviews and 54 people because two interviews were deemed unfit for analysis.

### *Data collection and analysis*

The interviews were performed by three research assistants who were trained to conduct narrative interviews. An interview guide was employed with as its core a narrative starting question (SQUIN - Single Question Inducing Narratives, see Wengraf, 2001) as follows: *What does your ideal living environment look like?* The remainder of the interview guide contained supporting questions on housing, wellbeing and care as main topics.

The narrative interviews were analysed following the narrative need pattern approach developed by Van Biene and colleagues (Van Biene, et al, 2008; Jansen et al., 2013). First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and segmented into coherent fragments. Coherence was determined by interpreting whether the fragment pertained to a single topic or theme and a breach with a consecutive fragment was plausible, and two research assistants agreed on the segmentation. Second, these fragments were coded in terms of a predefined category system (see Van Biene et al., 2008) pertaining to a) substantial categories in terms of life domains and environmental characteristics (WHAT-categories), b) categories pertaining to the actors in or the setting of the substantial theme (WHO-categories) and c) the wording, tone or style of the fragment (HOW-categories). Accumulating all interviews yielded a searchable coded database. Third, to function as sensitizing concepts for the analysis specific research questions were formulated allowing for directed searches in the narrative database yielding relevant data subsets. Fourth, interpretation of these data subsets by the research team resulted in a content analysis to answer the specific research questions and the detection and articulation of more general narrative patterns. In this way, the analysis follows a linear trail from construction of individual narratives by the respondents in the interviews to deconstruction in the analysis and reconstruction into collective narratives. For purposes of clarity, in this paper we will not report on the specific research questions but focus on the more general narrative patterns.

## **Results**

Apart from the decline of local services, results of the narrative analyses did not yield great differences between the various age categories and the physical scale of the small respectively very small communities. Therefore, our analyses below pertain to the substantial narratives across scale groups.

Respondents are generally satisfied with their environments. They describe their small village environments as quiet and green and enjoy living in their own homes. They indicate a preference for aging in their own homes devoid from dependence on others.

Older people in the villages of Overbetuwe have a positive stance regarding local facilities and services. By inhabitants of larger villages, the decline of local services is considered problematic. Social activities for older people, such as ball play and singing, are valued greatly. They are relatively complacent on public transport, although they barely use it. However, when they do, they find it pleasant to travel in an easy way to nearby cities like Arnhem and Nijmegen. In particular, the age groups 70-79 and 80+ indicate to be hindered by innovations as for instance a public transport smartcard.

Concerning social connections, the narratives indicate that functional attachment of village-dwellers does not contribute to resident action. Contrastingly, those frequently travelling outside the village, for example for shopping, actually contribute relatively little to local initiatives.

The narratives yield a positive attitude regarding adjustments to house property as it enables dwellers to continue to live independently for longer. A single storey house or an elevator is considered an important asset. However, it appears that older people have difficulty anticipating preventive adjustments. They often regard themselves as too young to do so and tend to wait until it is absolutely necessary to make adjustments.

*" Well, what neighbours? ... Yeah, yeah, he's technician, Techie, of course. Of course that occurred to me, but I think it's embarrassing. I do not do that. "*  
(Woman, Single, Age 70-79, Small Village)

The greatest advantage of aging at home is described as the experienced choice freedom in daily life, as older people maintain control over their lives. Disadvantages are also referred to by respondents, although sporadically.

*"You all want to be your own boss. Take complete care of yourself. And do not want to be dependent upon others."*  
(Couple, Age 60-69, Small Village)

For instance, respondents seem burdened by the maintenance of their garden which becomes more cumbersome with increasing physical disadvantage. If they have sufficient financial means, some respondents hire someone to take care of the garden work. Many older people have assistance in their households or are planning to arrange for this in the future. The narratives indicate that respondents are hesitant to ask their neighbours and/or children for help.

*"Maybe I will look a another house, but I postpone that a little, because I think the garden is nice, the little garden.... I'm not quite ready for it... The practical side I find difficult... One step at a time."*  
(Woman, Single, Age 70-79, Small village)

*"They are all so busy! My boys have courtship and... his daughter... has five children, but they are very busy. You do not always want to bother them... At least, I will not to ask for things."*  
(Couple, Age 70-79, Small village)

The results can be summarized by way of listing the central themes of the respondents' perspective indicating the most important narrative results in the following way, accompanied by a meaningful quotation from the interviews (Table 2).

Table 2 Narrative themes

Theme	Examples of personal statements
Ambivalence to call upon others for help	<i>"I don't want to be the burden of someone else"</i>
Maintaining independence	<i>"I know very well how I can remain self-reliant"</i>
Positive attitude regarding amenities	<i>"I think the amenities in my area fine and well served"</i>
House as comfortable home	<i>"I want a spacious house and a beautiful, quiet area"</i>
Perspective on the future	<i>"I'm afraid of what the future will bring"</i>

## Conclusion

In response to the research question, the results from Overbetuwe unexpectedly indicated no influence of the physical scale on experienced wellbeing, apart from the greater concern among inhabitants of larger villages towards the decline of local services. Furthermore, the narratives pertaining to social connections suggest that functional attachment of village-dwellers does not contribute to resident

action. Moreover, those residents frequently travelling outside the village, for example for shopping, actually contribute relatively little to local initiatives. This may be explained by amenities to fairly heavily rely on resident (collective) action, or residents of the smallest villages undertaking regular social activities themselves, thereby compensating for the lack of more organised informal meeting facilities such as community centers.

Comparing the results from the environmental and narrative analyses with a recent national study (Vermeij & Steenbekkers, 2015), yields differences as well as commonalities. In contrast with our results, the latter study did show that residents of the smallest villages have stronger cultural and landscape attachment to their village than residents of slightly larger villages and also contribute to local causes more often than residents of larger villages. However, the general satisfaction of respondents with their home and village as apparent from their narratives is in line with the national study, in which living in pleasant surroundings has become a more important part of their local attachment, whereas the village as an entity itself plays a less important role in dwellers' lives.

From the substantial narratives, several themes emerge concerning self-reliance and forms of attachment as mediating variables. Most strikingly, neighbourly assistance appears a relatively unfamiliar concept in the seven small communities of Overbetuwe: older people barely know their neighbours. They consider asking for help as inconvenient, difficult or embarrassing. Older people are also hesitant to receive support from their children, as the latter mostly have busy jobs and their own families to worry about. This calls into question the common policy assumption that is often made on the role of social attachment as supportive to live independently. The national study (Vermeij & Steenbekkers, 2015) confirmed that social attachment can be a key mediator to informal support, but also that differences in social attachment between villages are negligible compared to the major differences in social attachment between individual residents. Attempts to awaken the latent potential in a village could therefore be more effectively directed at expanding dwellers' social networks.

Moreover, in addition to social attachment, cultural attachment appears to mediate action for local causes in a generally stronger way in small villages than in towns. Although village residents are accustomed to a regional life, for many of them the village is still the most natural scale for informal support (Vermeij & Steenbekkers, 2015). Therefore, when village residents are encouraged to join forces with residents of other villages such a collaboration may have great potential for the development of informal support through social networks. Such a process of scaling up, may overcome negative influences of the physical boundaries of the natural smaller scale.

In conclusion, with respect to the integral assessment of village scale and wellbeing in terms of the CA the following picture emerges. Older people in villages place great value on resources such as amenities, service provisions and social networks that allow them to live independently in their own homes and receive the support they need to maintain their independence. Essentially, these resources provide them with realistic opportunities in their own environment. Once these opportunities diminish, the ability to make personal choices in leading the lives they have reason to value also decreases. The narratives indicate that this gives rise to feelings of fear and anxiety. A special role is found for social processes and social networks, that appear to add the support and resources of other people to one's individual capability conversion process thus enhancing the opportunities for the preferred functionings. This concurs with the notion that affiliation as a capability is architectonic (see Nussbaum, 2000): it enhances or stimulates the development of other capabilities.

Whereas these mechanisms in themselves represent important underlying principles of wellbeing, the narratives suggest that scaling may yield complex effects on the wellbeing of older dwellers in rural areas, emphasizing the plural nature of the concept (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2001). If a village scale is small, amenities and other resources may be relatively scarce compared to larger villages, hence on the one hand limiting the choice options for dwellers leading to a decrease of wellbeing, especially if they tend not to timely anticipate future health problems, but on the other hand also sparking dwellers' creativity in finding solutions to the new challenges. Moreover, small scales may also entail advantages in terms of the physical environment that enhance the experience of their habitat, and

therefore increase wellbeing. However, as societal changes involving austerity measures and demographic developments lead to fewer service provisions, the net effect of downscaling may be expected to be a decrease in wellbeing. This is confirmed by informal reports of older people in smaller villages of Overbetuwe that feel marginalized, especially by their own municipality, as they remain uninformed about what will be undertaken to secure their capabilities in the near future. Awareness of these complex effects in policy and planning and the development of remedial strategies is therefore essential to sustain a high quality of life in rural areas.

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