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The increasing relevance of European rural young people in policy agendas: Contributions from community psychology

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Abstract

Our paper aims to provide a short guide on how community psychologists can contribute to the improvement of rural young people's prospects. After briefly introducing the demographic trends of these young people in continental Europe for the past decade, we list the current challenges faced by rural European young generations, as well as the opportunities emerging for them from the twin transition that can inspire the community psychology field. We then contextualize community psychologists' interventions in this domain according to an ecological-systemic standpoint and by embracing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) perspective on research and practice. We further detail the reasons for adopting a PAR approach in research and practice to address rural young people's challenges and opportunities. Finally, we highlight four potential intermediation missions to uphold community psychologists' rural youth development input, based on the adopted theoretical and methodological standpoint. We conclude that our short guide can facilitate community psychology professionals' complete understanding of rural young generations' prospects, in line with the expected increase in the need of/demand for rural young people's participation. Our proposal may also have long-term benefits for rural communities by contributing to the redesigning of intergenerational relationships and securing critical mass.

Keywords: rural young people; participation; community psychology; interventions.

European rural areas correspond to low population density regions (less than 300 inhabitants per km2 and a minimum population of 5 000) (Eurostat,

2018). In the European Union (EU), rural areas account for more than 341,000.000 inhabitants, representing 30.60% of the EU's population. Rural communities are ethnically homogeneous, show strong social networks and local identities (Ludden, 2011), while facing aging trends (Farrugia, 2016).

Recently, the European Commission established a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas as stronger, more connected, and more resilient regions. This includes moving rural youth forward: one of the eleven priorities of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (European Council, 2018). These political proclamations are justified. Rural regions compare worse to urban areas in terms of early school leaving, young people aged 15-29 Not in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET) rates (Eurostat, 2021) and social inequalities (Bæck, 2016).

With this paper, we provide a short guide on how community psychologists can contribute to the improvement of rural young people's prospects. We do so by: (a) offering a brief overview of the demographic evolution of rural young people in the past decade; (b) listing the current challenges faced by rural European youths, but also the opportunities emerging for them in the context of the twin transition (digital and green); (c) situating community psychologists' interventions with rural young people from an ecological-systemic standpoint, while embracing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) perspective on research/practice; (d) detailing the reasons for adopting a PAR approach to address rural young people's challenges and opportunities; and (e) highlighting the field inputs to uphold rural youth development and the specific intermediation roles that can be taken on by community psychologists. Our reflection summarizes a creative session at the 11th European Conference of Community Psychology held in June 2021, focusing on our disparate

experiences of PAR projects involving rural youths. Bridging these experiences can offer scholars and practitioners a framework to better respond to rural young people's needs, while meeting the current policy priorities.

How are rural young people evolving in Europe?

For the past decade, the share of European young people living in rural areas has marginally declined from 27.40% in 2011 to 26.34% in 2020. This trend hides, however, marked differences in the evolution of the share of younger generations in rural areas across European countries. While in Eastern countries, such as Estonia (- 52.08 pp) and Poland (- 35.22 pp), or in Southern countries, such as Greece (- 50.37 pp) or Spain (- 52.30 pp), there has been a considerable decrease in the young rural population; in other countries, such as Denmark (+ 18.74 pp), France (+ 129.48 pp), Italy (+ 73.80 pp), or Germany (29.20 pp), the share of rural young people has been swiftly increasing (Eurostat, 2022). To a certain extent, these distinctive demographic patterns across European countries illustrate that European rural young people are culturally and socioeconomically diverse, as they experience different forms of rurality (Bæck, 2016). The needs and behaviors of Estonian rural young people are certainly different from those of French rural youths. These differences are, however, even more nuanced as experiences of rurality vary across different territories, such as coastal and mountainous areas or inland, border and outermost regions, imposing different degrees of access to resources (Simões et al., 2022). Rural young people nevertheless share common challenges and opportunities requiring the expertise of community psychologists.

What are the current challenges that can be more easily faced by rural European youth through the insights of community psychology practice and research?

Rural young people face specific challenges that need to be targeted in a more systematic way by community psychology research and practice. Below, we offer an overview of four major challenges that shape rural young people's prospects.

Rural youth outmigration. Distance to urban centers means that mobility conditions access to economic, cultural and symbolic resources. From early on in their lives, rural youths are driven by a complex decision-making process to match their socioeconomic situations with different forms of mobilities (staying, leaving, commuting between rural areas and cities) (Farrugia, 2016; Leibert, 2016). These decisions overlap with the transition from adolescence to adulthood, further increasing the uncertainty typical of transitional periods (Tanner & Arnett, 2016). In general, however, a dominant metrocentric rhetoric pressures young people into leaving the countryside, by situating the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams in cities (Farrugia, 2016, Simões et al., 2021). This discourse is especially relevant among those who are seeking tertiary education, more sophisticated jobs and can afford to leave (Simões, et al. 2021). Such conditions lead to an important divide among rural young generations: those leaving are essentially the most academic-minded, coming from privileged households; while those staying are often vulnerable youths that frequently struggle to attain secondary school qualifications (Farrugia, 2016). Strong outmigration fluxes, especially evident in Eastern and Southern countries (Eurostat, 2022), deploy rural areas from young critical mass: a vital

force for triggering social innovation and change in local communities (Theodori & Theodori, 2015).

Limited access to education. Rural young people's mobilities are strongly associated with lower access to education in rural areas. This reduced access is complicated by infrastructure, personnel, and curricula deficits. Schools in rural areas are often far from students' homes or at perennial risk of being shut down (Bæck, 2016). Besides these factors, rural schools have more difficulty in retaining teachers, meaning there are fewer good teachers motivated to live and work in these areas (Reagan et al., 2019). Moreover, curricular guidelines are usually centralized at the State level. As a result, school values echoed by on-the-ground programs are often mismatched with worldviews in such communities, with schools positioning the future of young generations in high-density territories, such as cities (Corbett, 2007; Green and Corbett, 2013). Adding to that, the offer of alternative educational pathways, such as Vocational Education and Training (VET) is limited, does not match local resources and economic opportunities, and/or fails to fulfill students' needs and expectations (Simões & Rio, 2020). Consequently, rural young people turn to urban centers to find for a satisfactory education.

Limited access to decent and meaningful work. Mobility trends and the lack of access to education form another challenge faced by rural young people: access to meaningful and decent work. A decent job grants access to full and just employment conditions, while benefiting from social protection and social dialogue at work. Meaningful employment promotes positive work attitudes and a sense of belongingness to an occupational group (Masdonati et al., 2021). Rural economies are organized around the primary sector activities

(e.g., agriculture). These activities are often passed on within families, demanding low skilled workers and sometimes leading to precarious, temporary or illegal work (Zipin et al., 2015). Moreover, rural youths have negative attitudes to these activities and, therefore, do not want to be professionally engaged in them (Simões, 2018; Simões & Rio, 2020). European initiatives (e.g., Green Deal), coupled with a renovated Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) may slowly change this panorama. Traditional activities will become increasingly complex, combining production with services (e.g., agriculture/ecotourism) and demanding a more sophisticated labor force in terms of training or technological knowledge. These tendencies can potentially fulfill young rural generations' employment expectations and access to decent and meaningful work experiences (Simões & Rio, 2020).

Increasing gender gaps among rural young women and men. Finally, it must be stressed that mobility, education and employment trends in rural areas are stretching the gap between young men and women in many ways. In some countries, such as Germany, a disproportionate number of men are generally staying in the countryside, leading to what Leibert (2016) has labeled as a masculinization phenomenon. However, gender gaps exceed the overall imbalance between the share of men and women in the countryside. Rural young women who are less academic - and professional - minded, or who do not have the resources to start a career, remain in the countryside and are trapped in biased stereotypes restricting them to traditional roles (e.g., family care) (Sadler et al., 2015). Moreover, their personal expression through education, leisure, or culture is limited, due to inadequate local infrastructures and programs (Bæck, 2016). Rural young men also struggle, because they are

usually low-skilled workers, wandering between jobs and dealing with precariousness and illegal forms of employment (Almeida & Simões, 2020).

What are the current opportunities out there for rural European youth that can be powered by community psychology practice and research?

The European Union vision for the next decade envisages the dual transition (digital and green) as the major source of social and economic change in the continent and worldwide. The centrality of these transformative processes can lead to a number of opportunities for rural young people, which can become central for social interventions and programs involving community psychologists. We briefly explore the potential benefits for rural young generations emerging from digital and green transitions. We also explain how these benefits can put rural young people's participation in the spotlight of rural community livelihoods, creating leeway for interventions driven by community psychologists.

Digital transition. Some studies (e.g., Neagu, Berigel, & Lendzhova, 2021) have demonstrated that rural young people show lower digital skills and literacy compared to urban youths. Furthermore, it is well-known that some rural areas, especially the most remote ones (e.g., some mountainous areas) struggle with low internet connectivity or that young people living in these regions do not have access to the most up-to-date equipment (European Commission, 2018). However, the digital transition can respond to some of the listed challenges faced by rural young people by expanding the coverage of welfare, education and employment services, especially by improving reaching out strategies aimed at those that are harder to target by public services (European

Commission, 2018). The pace of dematerializing services can also be increased, raising the number of young people working remotely from the countryside in demanding, sophisticated and well-paid jobs (International Labor Organization, 2022, in press).

Green transition. To a great extent, rural economies depend on the farming sector. Some rural regions have managed to diversify their economies, showing a higher share of people involved in the services sector with important impacts, such as an increase in the number of qualified jobs for young women or higher salaries (Corbett, 2007). The green transition will allow for an upgrade of farming activities, through innovation and a greater use of digital tools (Unay-Gailhard & Simões, 2021, in press). Moreover, farming is being increasingly combined with services to increase its economic value (e.g., ecotourism). At the same time, sustainability needs are increasingly emphasizing the importance of closer supply chains and local consumerism (Unay-Gaillhard & Simões, 2021, in press). Taken together, these changes can lead to a more diversified VET sector reflecting local opportunities and more rewarding and decent jobs, as the green transition principles are based on the assumption of overall sustainability (natural, social, and economic). As a result, more opportunities will be delivered to rural young people, reducing current pressures for outmigration.

Rural young people's participation. There are major concerns about low levels of youth involvement in institutionalized forms of participation (e.g., voting) across Europe. Rural youth participation is often limited to existing platforms dominated by older generations, reproducing local values/traditions (Ludden, 2011). However, recent findings show that vulnerable young people's participation in predominantly rural areas, such as outermost regions, is fueled

by a sense of loyalty to local communities, mediated by emotional ties with communities and personal agency (Simões, Fernandes-Jesus, & Marta, 2022). These findings pinpoint that rural younger generations are inclined to solve concrete problems that affect them and their communities, just like young people elsewhere (Barrett & Zani, 2015).

Moreover, the demands stemming from the twin transition in terms of new skills and up-to-date knowledge will certainly lead to greater youth participation, further strengthening intergenerational relationships in rural areas in multiple ways. European rural communities' social organization often draws on ethnically homogeneous social networks, tied by strong informal relationships and a sense of loyalty to local values (Ludden, 2011). These values are ritualized through events or have an economic meaning, with the production of local goods reflecting a sense of uniqueness. Policies incrementing new economic activities in the countryside will pressure greater cooperation between young people and the elderly on how to manage local resources, create businesses and help them thrive in current economies. Moreover the settlement of more young people and newcomers in rural areas will intensify the dialogue between local traditions and urban or foreign cultures (Hedberg & do Carmo, 2012). Although such intercultural contact can create inter-group tensions, it might also lead to creative dialogue between different generations in the long-term. Specifically, local heritage and goods may be resituated in the global culture, encouraging young people to stay in rural areas.

How can community psychologists ground their work to meet European rural young people's challenges?

Community psychologists work with either whole or some sections of communities to produce social changes and improvements (Kagan et al., 2011). They also adopt complex approaches to social phenomena by situating them 'in' and 'from' a specific context; considering the individual-context relationship to be based on a processual perspective; and acknowledging people as agentic subjects 'in' and 'on' the world (Albanesi et al., 2021; Arcidiacono et al. 2021). Therefore, their role can be pivotal in helping address the challenges faced by rural youths.

The ecological-systemic lens (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2006) provides an appropriate theoretical ground to address pressing rural youth challenges. Overall, ecological meta-models frame personal development as being driven by different interactions placed at distinct levels of reality. Thus, the individual characteristics (individual system), the relationships between him/her and meaningful others (e.g., parents and peers) in proximal life contexts (microsystem); the connections between these life contexts, such as family and school (mesosystem); the broader institutional setting (exosystem) and the dominant values or beliefs (macrosystem) represent different layers of rural ecology. All these must be accounted for, promoting meaningful change in rural young people’s lives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The ecological-systemic view offers, therefore, a whole model of reality, organized in multiple, interconnected layers which, in our opinion, successfully covers the complexity of the relationships between people, institutions and their tacit rules and traditions that come together to shape the lives of rural young people.

The ecological-system lens must be supported by an appropriate methodological approach to help designing research and interventions for rural young people. The central feature of this methodological approach must be youth participation. This vision corresponds to a wide range of approaches aiming at a more balanced collaboration between researchers and communities/groups dealing with or responsible for solving a given social problem that is under study at the time (Cook, Boote, Buckley, Vougioukalou, & Wright, 2017). Therefore, as we see it, participation is more than mere consultation and tokenism. It refers to continuous involvement and leadership in the process of addressing, researching, planning, and assessing relevant social problems (Bradbury, 2017; Lai, 2008; Williams et al., 2020).

Our definition of participation has a two-fold benefit. Firstly, framed in these terms, participation empowers community participants as stakeholders, increasing their knowledge, skills, and energy to produce social change (Bradbury, 2017). Secondly, a collaborative, non-hierarchical approach to complex social phenomena involving researchers, practitioners, and communities/groups increases the odds of producing effective and long-lasting results. Such complex social issues are usually labeled as “wicked” problems, because they require non-linear responses based on complex multi-stakeholder efforts in terms of negotiation, testing solutions, or dealing with uncertainty (Christensen, 2015; Marques, 2017).

PAR is a community-based research approach that underlines the resolution of complex social problems through the non-hierarchical participation of all stakeholders in collective inquiry and action, and experimentation grounded in local social history (Arcidiacono et al., 2021; Bradbury, 2017).

PAR's methodological approach is coherent with the fact that youth participation in rural communities will certainly increase as a positive collateral effect of the dual transition, as we have mentioned. The increasing share of young people in countries such as Denmark, France, Germany, or Italy may be a sign that this process has already started in some of the continent's more advanced economies. The proposed option of this methodological view guiding community psychologists' research and practice in this domain is, however, rooted in three additional contextually relevant reasons.

Firstly, PAR proposes a model of collaboration in secure environments for the discussion and negotiation of solutions that can help to counteract a predominant hierarchical model of intergenerational relationships in rural areas. Social relationships in such areas are more often driven by collectivistic views, bringing forward values such as loyalty to the group, authority and respect for older people (Ludden, 2011). This means that older generations often set the social priority agenda in rural communities, frequently overlooking young people's needs. By using the PAR approach to address rural young people's problems, community psychologists can open up appropriate forums for debate and channel young people's views into the discussion of solutions for outmigration, education, work or gender role challenges identified earlier. In the long-run, by using this methodological approach, community psychologists can also help change predominant local values and positively affect, at least to a certain extent, the intergenerational dialogue (Bradbury, 2017).

Secondly, PAR represents an opportunity to reduce the high levels of suspicion regarding institutions among rural young people that have been widely reported (e.g., Bæck, 2016; European Commission, 2018). Several

reasons justify rural people's disengagement and distrust of institutions. Overall, strong informal social networks in the countryside compete with institutions to provide younger generations with resources (e.g., jobs). This competition is just one of the ways to ensure adherence to local, traditional values, which contrast with more liberal values proposed by institutions, particularly by schools. Moreover, higher levels of school failure in rural areas mean that from an early age rural young people have negative feelings towards institutions (Sadler et al., 2015). Lower levels of coverage in terms of public services or infrastructure in the countryside only strengthen the belief among rural young people that the services are not there for them (Jale & Tosun, 2019). Bringing stakeholders together around the same table, including services and young people, in a non-hierarchical way, seems like a natural first step in community psychologists helping to tackle young people's distrust.

Thirdly, PAR is an opportunity for increasing rural young people's knowledge and skills when resources are scarce. As we have mentioned, rural communities struggle due to a lack of educational infrastructure and programs (Bæck, 2016; Sadler et al., 2015). As others have shown, school is one of the few arenas where vulnerable young people can find opportunities for participation (Malafaia, Neves, & Menezes, 2021). Action research projects, led by community psychologists co-opting young people as co-researchers or co-leaders, can fill this gap. Offering the chance to promote significant learning about participation principles among rural young people, they contribute to increasing local critical mass in the long-run (Theodori & Theodori, 2015).

What are the roles that community psychologists can take on to address rural young people's needs?

By adopting a PAR approach, duly informed by the ecological-systemic model, community psychologists can help tackling the above-mentioned European rural youth challenges, as well as creating potential opportunities for them, by establishing themselves as *intermediation agents*. This position empowers them in negotiating the tensions between the several layers of social reality (from the individual to the macrosystem), through participation and change facilitated by PAR, in order to address four missions.

Firstly, an *intermediation between youth needs and services deliverance* is required considering the mismatch between services support and rural youth needs/expectations (Simões & Rio, 2020). The following Norwegian case example illustrates this mission:

> Riding motorcycles in the woods was the preferred activity among young boys from the west coast district of Norway at risk of dropping out of school. The local owner of the woods was an old farmer, who wanted to meet the locals who made riding tracks across his woods. Instead of punishment, the owner provided a space in the barn for repair and parking, and permission to use the woods for practicing and competition. The psychologist facilitated a dialogue with the farmer, fundraisers, and those supporting the idea of a local trial club.
>
> The boys had a high level of technical skills and mechanical knowledge. For service providers to acknowledge their skills on a personal level, contact was maintained on equal terms. Meetings with key service providers were organized on the school premises and included the boys, the head teacher and the culture departments' directors. The dialogue between generations helped to increase the formal status of the project and connected the boys to the institution they were against. No meetings were held without the boys

> taking part, as they were members and responsible for decisions taken by the club board. This engagement and participation influenced the community services and policies, and secured the club budget for the years to follow (Bunting & Moshuus, 2017; Ommundsen, 2000).

Secondly, community psychologists can facilitate *intermediation between youth initiatives and decision-makers*. They are professionals trained in negotiation/communication, who are ready to engage with youth-led initiatives and to bridge them with local/regional decision-makers, leveraging expectations and demands from both sides. The following Portuguese example captures this mission:

> The Azores Islands, a North Atlantic outermost archipelago, struggle with a high youth out-migration rate. In 2017, university students initiated a movement to discuss the conditions to return to the islands after completing their studies on mainland Portugal. The initiative included two conferences and local debates. The movement involved a community psychology research group to develop a 3-year study on understanding both subjective and structural factors shaping the intention to return. This collaborative work led to a motion presented at the Regional Parliament, and inspired recent changes in regional employment/training policies. For instance, subsidies for first internships in the region were substantially raised to attract more youths that have just finished their degree (Simões, Mateus, & Rocha, 2020).

Thirdly, community psychologists must undertake *intermediation between practice and research.* This is required because of the remarkable lack of knowledge about innovative/effective interventions led by informal groups, NGOs or public services. Community psychologists can help to shape these interventions by bringing in theoretical knowledge and appropriate

methodologies for intervention development, while adding a research perspective in terms of organizing, understanding, and reporting their results to scientific audiences and local authorities. The following Italian example summarizes this mission:

> A Master's student in Community Psychology from a small rural village – and also a part-time photographer - was worried about the idea that local youth could grow up with a negative representation of their village. She proposed developing a Photovoice project involving local junior high school students to discuss and portray the village's pros and cons, while making proposals to improve their livelihood. The school principal agreed and the students were enthusiastic. They worked hard, collecting photos and preparing an exhibition supposedly to be held in the town hall. However, when some parents, who were also in the town council, discovered that students would also be highlighting some local issues, the town hall withdrew its collaboration, and the students were advised against continuing the project. Determined to move forward, however, they found an alternative place for the exhibition. This was offered by a local NGO and, with Master's students also promoting the event, they invited the community and the mayor to the exhibition. The municipality ended up solving the critical issues that the kids had documented with photos, before the opening of the exhibition. By having the opportunity to be active in their community and gaining public visibility, these youths felt empowered, strengthening their sense of community. The magnitude of change was assessed with a longitudinal quantitative study, while the process emerged both from field observation and focus groups (Galderisi & Albanesi, 2018).

Fourthly, community psychologists must encourage an *intermediation between research and research.* This is needed because rural challenges require complex, multidisciplinary approaches. The intermediation here involves establishing a dialogue between distinct scientific areas, inspired by the

ecological-systemic models. This “whole model” approach might integrate diverse scientific perspectives focusing on different layers of reality, enabling a more complete picture of several challenges faced by rural youth, as the following example illustrates:

> The Rural NEET Youth Network (RNYN) is a COST Action proposed and led by a community psychologist. Involving more than 100 participants from 33 countries, this international network aims to develop a whole model of comprehension of rural NEETs’ social exclusion risks. Inspired by the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), this multidisciplinary network will evolve in 2023 into an Online Observatory of Rural Youth committed to continuous scientific production, young researchers’ training and informing policy-makers at local/regional/national levels.

Conclusion

While rural young generations, on the whole, face tremendous challenges (e.g., lower access to education), they may also find opportunities in societal transformations attached to the digital and green transitions. We believe the acceleration of the twin transition powered by broadband European policies has the potential to increase dramatically the needs and probability of rural young people’s social and economic participation in their communities. Community psychologists can have a crucial role in thwarting the existing challenges, as well as in expanding the forthcoming opportunities for rural young people. They must, however, position themselves from a theoretical and methodological point of view, while targeting the roles they can play. Our vision is that community psychologists may help meeting these aspirations by using appropriate

theoretical (ecological-systemic) and methodological (PAR) approaches, together with several intermediation missions between youths and social structures. This positioning provides a complete understanding of the rural young generations' prospects and is fully aligned with the expected increase in the need of and demand for rural young people's participation. It also has the potential to provide benefits for rural communities in the long-run, in terms of reshaping intergenerational relationships and co-developing strategies for securing critical mass.

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