



## To participate, or not to participate – That is the question. (Non-)participation of older residents in rural communities

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, rural residents' participation within their local communities has attracted attention within scientific and political debates that focus on sustaining or improving the quality of life in villages. Retired older people feature centrally in these discussions, as they are perceived to have the time and life experience to participate in various local activities. This paper contributes to the existing literature through an examination of older villagers' participation and non-participation within their communities in a strongly ageing rural area in Germany. Applying mixed methods and using survey data compiled for older residents, we identified six groups differentiated according to four types of participative practices and two main rationales for non-participation within villages in this region, thus introducing nuances and complexity to both sides of the participation/non-participation dichotomy. Our comparison of these six groups, considering their socio-economic characteristics and residential histories, revealed that women were underrepresented in positions of responsibility and that poor health and advanced age were primary reasons for non-participation. There were minor differences in the participation of village stayers and incomers, who accounted for a larger share of non-participants. As strategies to sustain or improve local quality of life should accommodate the interests of all residents, we advocate raising awareness regarding non-participant groups within research and policy contexts.

### 1. Introduction

In many rural areas across Germany and, more widely, Europe, populations have been ageing and declining for several decades, while services and infrastructure are diminishing and becoming increasingly centralised (Clasen, 2005; Steinführer et al., 2014). One political strategy aimed at positively affecting the declining population trends and quality of life in such areas entails efforts to promote citizens' local participation by supporting the voluntary sector (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019). In this context, older retired individuals are often considered a potentially valuable resource, as they have the time and life experience to contribute to their communities (Freedman, 1997; Liu and Besser, 2003). However, other scholars have challenged this view (Aner and Hammerschmidt, 2008; Mettenberger and Küpper, 2019; Ubels et al., 2020). Within rural Germany, formal voluntary positions, known as *Ehrenamt*, and participation in associations have a long history and are thought to play an important role in older people's everyday life worlds (Kohli and Künemund, 2001; BMFSFJ, 2017a). Moreover, the literature has highlighted the positive effects of community participation, such as

fostering networks, competences and liveability as well as individuals' empowerment, good health and general well-being (Davies et al., 2018; Huang, 2019). The participation of older residents within rural communities entails multifaceted dimensions and has been widely discussed in and beyond Germany (Davis et al., 2012; Joseph and Skinner, 2012). Qualitative as well as quantitative studies conducted in rural and urban areas have identified links between individuals' (non-)participation within communities and their residential trajectories (Patten et al., 2015; Haartsen and Stockdale, 2018). Empirical research that focuses on these links is of particular salience in a context of declining and ageing rural populations, especially in light of the above-mentioned political strategy of 'keeping' people in rural areas and safeguarding basic services and quality of life through enhanced participation.

In light of these observations, we formulated the following research questions. In what ways do older people participate in their local communities and how are forms of participation and non-participation linked to individuals' residential histories? We sought to answer these questions through a study of older people living in a rural area in Germany characterised by a declining population and a high proportion of

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older residents (BBSR, 2019; LSN, 2020). We begin by presenting an overview of previous studies in relevant fields and the context of the data and methods applied in the study. We subsequently analyse the data in three phases. Firstly, we identify four types of participative practices that emerged from a hierarchical cluster analysis. Secondly, we discuss two rationales for non-participation identified through thematic coding of open-ended responses given by respondents who were not involved in their local communities. Lastly, we compare the four groups of participants and the two groups of non-participants based on the respondents' socio-economic characteristics and residential histories. We conclude with a critical discussion of the methods applied in this study and identify existing research gaps that remain to be addressed.

## 2. Previous research and conceptualisation

In this section, we review studies conducted in diverse contexts within Germany as well as in other European countries, the UK, the United States, Canada and Australia. Despite their diverse contexts, we considered these studies helpful because from an analytical perspective, the findings of theoretically grounded (case) studies can to some extent be generalized (Yin, 2014).

### 2.1. Applying a life course perspective

Studies have shown how changes in individuals' practices and attitudes over the life course can often be attributed to transitions into different life stages. From a life course perspective, life stages are defined not only by age but also by family and work contexts, as these contexts are life structuring to some extent. The transitions from one life stage to another are not usually triggered by abrupt life events; rather, they are brought about by processes that affect individuals' attitudes towards various aspects of their lives. An example is the anticipation of entering retirement (Stockdale and MacLeod, 2013). Life course approaches reveal how developments in one life domain, such as work, intersect with those in other life domains. Furthermore, time and place are considered structuring dimensions in this approach, which posits that the lives of different individuals are interlinked (Elder et al., 2003). An increasing number of studies on migration and residential mobility are grounded in this perspective (Kley, 2011; Wingens et al., 2011; Lersch, 2014; Findlay et al., 2015). Accordingly, mobility and immobility are seen as blurred practices, that are relational and subject to re-negotiation (Coulter et al., 2016; Halfacree and Merriman, 2018; Stockdale and Haartsen, 2018). The diminishing importance of employment opportunities and the 'empty nest' phenomenon encountered by individuals approaching retirement often lead them to re-negotiate their existing residential situations (Stockdale and Catney, 2014). As rural areas are popular migration destinations for older people (Stockdale and MacLeod, 2013), this section of the population is becoming increasingly heterogeneous in many rural areas. However, Fernández-Carro and Evandrou (2014, p. 48) have shown that "25 per cent of the older people in continental Europe have been living in their current home for 75 per cent of their adult life or more". These numbers are higher for rural areas than for urban areas and vary across countries.

Our study is framed by a life course approach, as it enables us to link current participative practices to residential trajectories. "[T]he scheduling of multiple trajectories" is determined by an individual's age-related means and opportunities as well as by social timing (Elder, 1994, p. 6). Accordingly, the concept of time, which is central in life course research, is differentiated at three scales: "the micro-dynamics of an individual's biographical time, the meso-dynamics of institutional (or social) time, and the macro-dynamics of historical time" (Wingens et al., 2011, p. 10). Micro-dynamics encompass individuals' daily rhythms and routines as well as the pacing and sequencing of life events.

### 2.2. Approaches to community

The concept of 'community' and its meanings in people's everyday lives have been studied from different perspectives, only a few of which are discussed here. Referring to scientific studies conducted on community, Barrett (2015, p. 182) defined community as a "primordial type of social organization situated between family and kinship and society-at-large". It is associated with place, as "propinquity, population stability and continuous interaction patterns" lead to shared experiences, memories and social attachments (Barrett, 2015, p. 182). Gibson-Graham (2003, p. 53) also highlighted the importance of place, suggesting that "[l]ocality is the place where engagement with the stranger is enacted. [...] It is also the crossroads where those who have nothing in common (all of us) meet to construct community [...]". Liepins (2000) focused on the production of community through practices, meanings, spaces and structures, and Löw (2001) observed that communities shape and define spaces through identity-forming practices. Potentially overlapping communities, entailing different spatial references, can also co-exist within a single village, neighbourhood or street, forging differential spaces of inclusion and exclusion (Massey, 2016). These perspectives on community reveal that communities of place, including rural villages, are not necessarily characterised by homogeneity and mutual understanding. In other words, they are not as "warm and fluffy" as public discourse often suggests (Farmer and Stephen, 2012, p. 85). Thus, it is important to "distinguish [...] knowledge of what community is from [...] beliefs about what we would like it to be" (Day, 1998, p. 236). In rural areas of Germany, which typically feature compact villages rather than dispersed settlements or single farms, the term *Dorfgemeinschaft* is often used to describe territorially defined village communities, conveying a notion of homogeneity and close-knit relationships. This German term has been criticised for romanticising social relations within villages and because of its historical connotation as the small-scale counterpart of *Volksgemeinschaft*, which prevailed during the Nazi era (Blaschke, 2018). However, *Dorfgemeinschaft* also appears in the names of national rural development programmes and is used by villagers themselves.

### 2.3. Local community participation

In this paper, we apply a relatively broad definition of 'community participation', which functions as an umbrella term for a large range of activities. This conceptualisation is inspired by the 'Third Civic Engagement Report' that was published in 2020 by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). Community participation "is voluntary, takes place in public spaces, is community-based, serves the common good and is not aimed at material gain" (BMFSFJ, 2020, p. 10). We explicitly focus on local village contexts, as older rural residents' "volunteer behaviour is embedded within the structure of local rural communities" (Warburton and Winterton, 2017, p. 134). Additionally, whereas locally-based participation has been shown to influence an individual's relationship to their locality, participation elsewhere has not (Treinen, 1974). A number of quantitative and qualitative studies have categorised individuals according to their ways of participating (Gielsing and Haartsen, 2017; Mettenberger and Küpper, 2019), while Ubels et al. (2020) examined non-participation among middle-aged and older individuals in a Dutch case study. The present study aims to contribute to this discussion by identifying forms of participation and non-participation, thereby introducing nuances to both sides of the dichotomy.

Focusing generally on participation and volunteering practices in

Germany, various studies have illuminated trends relating to these fields of activity.<sup>1</sup> The ‘Second Civic Engagement Report’ indicated that the percentage of volunteers is rising in Germany, with higher numbers in rural areas than in urban areas (BMFSFJ, 2017b). Community participation has been found to differ according to socio-economic factors, such as age, income and education (Nadler, 2017; Simonson et al., 2017; Kleiner and Klärner, 2019). Most studies have also identified differences between the modes of community participation of women and men. Köcher and Haumann (2018) found that improved access to education and participation in the labour market have been transformative for women, whose representation within voluntary organizations is now equal to that of men. However, leading roles and formalised positions connected to prestige, equipment and the power to influence processes are still more often occupied by men (Notz, 2010).

While traditional associations in the fields of sports and culture continue to play a key role within rural society, individual projects and collectively organised forms of self-help are becoming more prevalent along with a trend of short-term volunteering commitments (Nadler, 2017). These emerging trends can partially be explained by individuals’ growing independence from their social, familial and regional contexts and from traditional roles and relationships (Wenzel et al., 2012). Moreover, they are linked to the realisation of the limitations of “the traditional ‘provider-centric’ model[...] of the welfare state” (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012, p. 1122). These limitations are especially evident in rural areas, where voluntary work is also conceived in instrumental terms as a means to ensure the availability of services and sustain local quality of life. In particular, ‘younger’ retirees are often portrayed as having spare time to invest in activities; a perspective that is also reflected in the term “productive ageing” (Davis et al., 2012, p. 338). Retirees are thus discursively attributed responsibility for the local community (Garthwaite, 2017; Becker, 2019), which can be seen as a motivating factor for their participation. However, as revealed in previous studies, individuals’ motives for community participation are complex (e.g. Priller, 2010; Gieling et al., 2018). Ryan and Deci (2000) developed a helpful theoretical perspective on motivation, considered within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which differentiates between forms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation that are internalized to varying degrees. They posited that extrinsic motivation becomes more predominant over the life course, with the attachment of responsibilities to social roles, such as one of active involvement as a retiree.

#### 2.4. Residential histories and local community participation

Previous studies have identified differences between ‘established’ residents and incomers in terms of their local participation (Elias and Scotson, 1994 [1965]; Farmer and Stephen, 2012). In the context of rural villages, Kelly et al. (2019) indicated that newcomers find it difficult to access and become part of groups of established locals who were ‘born and bred’ in these places. Forms of local participation can provide the means of gaining access to communities or for long-term residents and elderly individuals to stay connected with others (Walsh et al., 2012). Patten et al. (2015, p. 128) pointed out that incomers are often excluded from participating in certain community-based activities because of existing tensions that relate to “animosity towards urban encroachment and rural dilution”. However, they also suggested that over time, the probability of being included increases for newcomers. Other studies have explicitly highlighted the diversity of newcomers, with some of them being very active in rural community life (Gustafson, 2009). In light of these studies that emphasise differences in

<sup>1</sup> In some of the above-cited studies, terms such as ‘volunteering’, ‘voluntary’ or ‘civic engagement’ are used. As the practices and structures associated with these terms all fit definitionally under the umbrella term ‘community participation’, we have included their findings in our discussion.

participation between ‘established’ residents and incomers, we aimed to explore the connections between community participation and residential histories, looking “[b]eyond the local-newcomer divide” (Gieling et al., 2017, p. 237).

### 3. Data and methods

#### 3.1. The study region

This case study was conducted in a region in the south-eastern part of Lower Saxony in Germany, which was selected because it is characterised as rural with a substantive ageing and declining population (Thünen-Institut für Ländliche Räume, 2019). The region is part of the former administrative district of Osterode, which was merged with the district of Göttingen in 2016. The population of this region is concentrated in villages and larger towns at the edge of the Harz Mountains within distinct topographical and settlement structures. While some of the villages are located in very narrow corridors between hills and dense forests, others are located in less mountainous areas surrounded by open fields that are mainly used for agricultural purposes. This study focuses on villages in this area with less than 2000 inhabitants.

In the recent past, developments in the region were strongly influenced by the division of the German nation during the Cold War and the ripple effects following its reunification in 1990. The study region, which was part of the border area between East and West Germany during the Cold War, received special funding (*Zonenrandzulage*) linked to its marginal status. Following reunification, this special funding for the region ceased, as it was once again positioned at the centre of Germany. For some years in the early 1990s, it had positive net migration rates because of the incoming flow of people, particularly from the former state of East Germany. However, between 1996 and 2013, whereas net migration rates were negative, the long-term ageing trend continued (Erdmann, 2013; BBSR, 2019). In 2008, Osterode and the neighbouring district of Goslar had the highest percentages of elderly residents aged 75 years and above among all of Germany’s rural districts. In 2015, the region’s unemployment rate was on par with the national average at 6.4%, but higher than the West German average of 5.7% (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2016). The long-term reduction of services of general interest in recent years has complicated life for older individuals with limited physical mobility (Erdmann, 2013; Steinführer et al., 2014).

#### 3.2. Data collection and the study context

The data used for this study were gathered during the STAYin(g) Rural project, which is being implemented by the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, Queen’s University Belfast in Northern Ireland and the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies in Germany. We designed a questionnaire covering a variety of topics: residential histories and future plans, feelings of belonging to the area and the local community, socio-economic information, household composition and the housing situation, internet use and local community participation. A drop-off-and-collect method, entailing multiple call-backs, was used to distribute the questionnaires. Although this method is time- and resource-intensive, it results in higher response rates and reduced sample bias and is well suited for geographically compact areas, such as densely built-up rural villages (Trentelman et al., 2016).

We contacted every second household in the region under study, beginning with a randomly selected address in each village.<sup>2</sup> To select one person aged 18 years or above within each household, we chose the ‘last-birthday method’, which is generally well-suited for self-

<sup>2</sup> The use of postal address files was not considered practical because data at the level of villages (which are all under the administration of larger municipalities) are not generally reliable in Germany.

administered surveys (Dillman et al., 2014). We tried to contact 2024 eligible households and distributed 1650 questionnaires, of which 1106 were completed and returned. Thus, the completion rate was 67% (total completed/delivered), and the response rate was 55% (total completed/eligible). This study covered approximately 13% of individuals aged 18 years and above in the selected villages, which have a total population of about 9800 inhabitants of whom about 8400 are aged 18 years and above (LSN, 2020). Our analysis focused on retired as well as non-retired individuals above the age of 65 years, who were assumed to be close to retirement. This group was chosen because of the high percentage of older people in the region and the prevalence of the discourse around productive ageing. The subsample comprised 42% (n = 463) of the original data set. This percentage was higher than the official statistics would suggest: 34% of the adult population in the four municipalities are aged 65 years and above (LSN, 2020). We posit three main reasons for this overrepresentation. Firstly, following the logic of a life course structured by life events, we included retired individuals below the age of 65 years in our sample. Secondly, the official statistics include the town centres, which were not included in this study. Thirdly, older people are more likely to be at home at any given time (Steele et al., 2001). Following official statistics, the gender distribution for the 65+ years age group in the area is approximately 45% male and 55% female residents. This difference mainly arose because of the much higher percentage of women in the age group above 80 years. The sample used for this study comprised 56% male and 44% female respondents. This overrepresentation of male respondents can be attributed to traditional gender roles within this age group. Additionally, individuals of very advanced ages, who are predominantly female, were less willing to participate in the survey.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. Participation and non-participation of older villagers

We applied the approach depicted in Fig. 1 in our analysis. We divided the sample of older residents into two groups: those who were involved in the community (n = 338, 75%) and those who were not involved in the community (n = 112, 25%). Because data were missing in 87 cases, more detailed analyses were subsequently performed based

on information obtained for 363 respondents. To identify participative practices within local communities, we conducted an exploratory cluster analysis using survey information on how respondents participated. Open-ended responses provided by non-participants detailing the reasons for not participating were analysed thematically. Lastly, the identified rationales for non-participation as well as the types of participative practices were brought together along a spectrum of (non-)participation within the local community.

##### 4.1. Types of participative practices

As previously indicated in the literature review, community participation was operationalised as local participation. More specifically, respondents reported their self-perceptions of how they did or did not participate locally. In the questionnaire, the level of involvement was self-assessed using the following statements: “I am supportive”, “I am actively involved”, “I have a defined role”, “I take the lead” and “I am not involved in any activity and I don’t attend activities/events”. All respondents who were involved in activities to some degree were asked to provide information on the field(s) of activity and the time they invested in these activities per week. Additionally, respondents rated self- and community-related motivational factors according to their perceived importance.<sup>4</sup>

To identify basic types of participative practices, we clustered the respondents according to the levels of their community involvement, focusing on the associated responsibility and average number of hours spent on activities per week. The dimensions of responsibility and time have both been discussed in the literature on community participation and volunteering and can be embedded within a life course perspective (see Chapter 2.1 and 2.3). Hierarchical clustering was conducted by applying the complete linkage method in combination with the city block distance, which is the recommended measure of distance for clusters based on ordinal variables (Schendera, 2010). After examining descriptions of the clusters and calculating F- and t-values, we deemed four clusters to be optimal. As Fig. 2 shows, descriptions of the resulting types of practices were framed with reference to the two cluster variables.

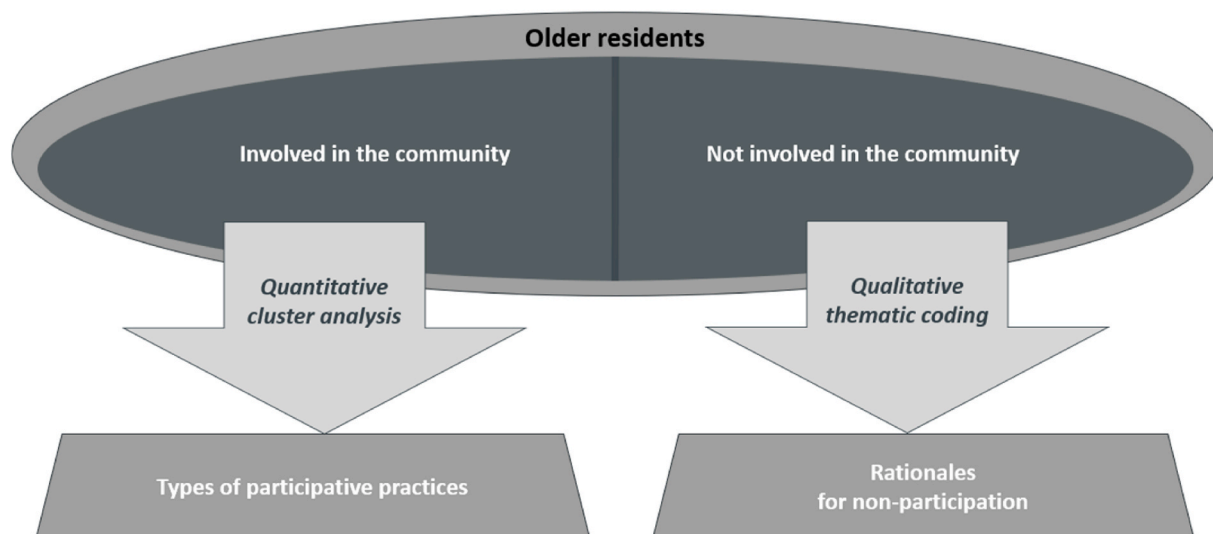


Fig. 1. Overview of the analytical approach used to identify forms of (non-)participation.

<sup>3</sup> Appendix A.1 provides an overview of the socio-economic information for all of the respondents in our sample.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the questionnaire items and options for responding, see Appendix A.2.

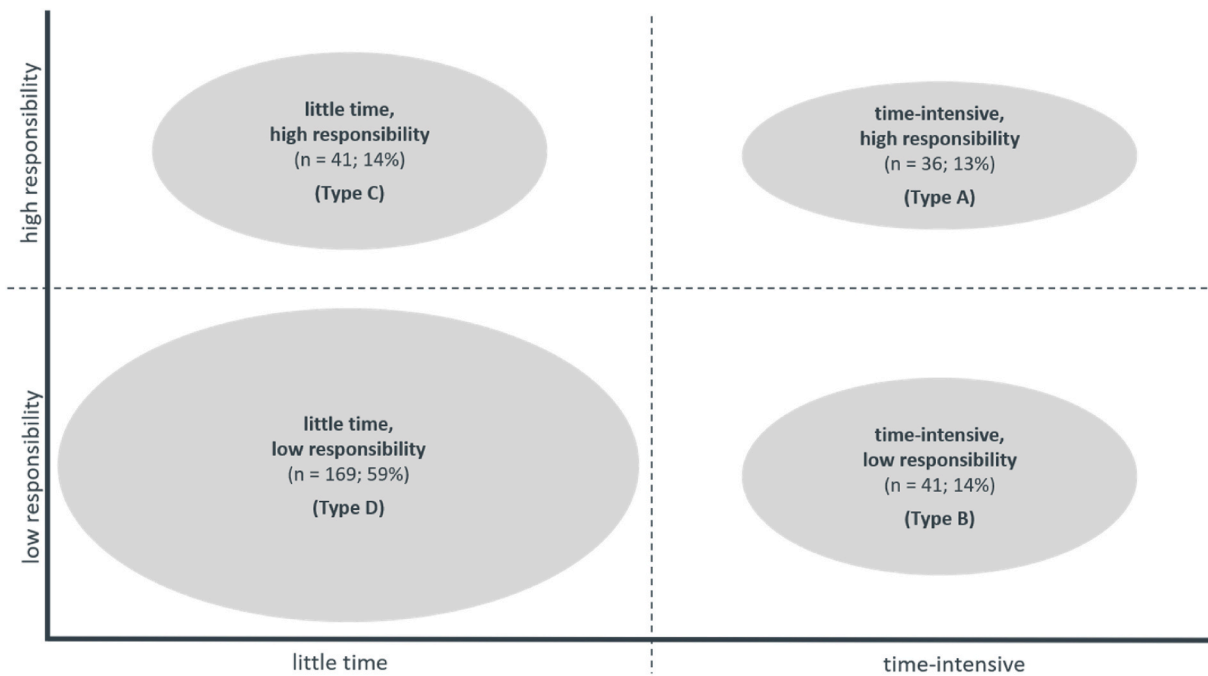


Fig. 2. Types of participative practices based on invested hours per week and levels of responsibility, as reported by respondents.

The largest cluster comprised practices that consumed *little time* and in which the respondents were either *supportive* or *actively involved*. The remaining three clusters were more or less the same size. Table 1 shows the distribution of the two variables for these four types of practices. In terms of absolute numbers, being supportive of community activities and spending between one to three hours per week were the most frequently chosen options. Only a limited number of respondents engaged in practices associated with a *high responsibility* level compared with those who engaged in practices that entailed a *low responsibility* level.

4.1.1. Fields of local participation

Table 2 shows that sport and leisure as well as participation in annual community events were the key contexts for all four types of participation, followed by culture, informal volunteering, community development and religious practices. Participation in sport and leisure was

especially characteristic of individuals who participated in *time-intensive* practices entailing *low responsibility* levels (B). Strikingly, only a small number of respondents reported involvement in local politics. Statistically significant differences among the four types of practices were detected for several fields, notably local politics, revealing a tendency to invest a considerable amount of time and to assume substantial responsibility for such activities. The results of the analysis also indicated that individuals who participated in *time-intensive* practices entailing *high responsibility* levels (A) were active in four different fields of activity, whereas those who participated in activities requiring *little time* and *low responsibility* levels (D) only participated in two fields on average.

4.1.2. Reasons for local participation

The key reasons for respondents’ engagement in all four types of participation were primarily community-related and secondarily self-related (Table 3). The least importance was attached to two reasons

Table 1  
Descriptions of the types of participative practices based on the cluster variables.

	Participative practices				Total
	Time-intensive, high responsibility (A)	Time-intensive, low responsibility (B)	Little time, high responsibility (C)	Little time, low responsibility (D)	
<b>Total n</b>	36	41	41	169	287
<b>Level of participation (%)</b>					
I am supportive	0.0	68.3	0.0	69.2	50.5
I am actively involved	0.0	31.7	0.0	30.8	22.6
I have a defined role	27.8	0.0	46.3	0.0	10.1
I take the lead	72.2	0.0	53.7	0.0	16.7
<b>Time spent on activities (%)</b>					
Maximum 1 h/week	0.0	0.0	17.1	52.7	33.4
1–3 h/week	0.0	0.0	82.9	47.3	39.7
3–6 h/week	61.1	85.4	0.0	0.0	19.9
More than 6 h/week	38.9	14.6	0.0	0.0	7.0

**Table 2**  
 Descriptions of the types of participative practices according to the fields of participation.<sup>a,b</sup>

	Participative practices				Total n
	Time-intensive, high responsibility (A)	Time-intensive, low responsibility (B)	Little time, high responsibility (C)	Little time, low responsibility (D)	
<b>Total n</b>	36	41	41	169	287
<b>Fields of participation (%)</b>					
Sport and leisure	58.3	68.3 (C, D <sup>**</sup> )	35.0	42.0	134
Annual community event	50.0	43.9	42.5	38.5	118
Culture	47.2 (C*, D <sup>**</sup> )	26.8	22.5	18.9	69
Informal help/support for others	22.2	14.6	27.5	26.0	69
Community development	36.1	14.6	32.5	18.3	63
Church/ religious group	30.6	26.8	15.0	18.3	59
Charitable organisation	19.4	19.5	17.5	14.2	46
Emergency response (e.g. voluntary firefighters)	19.4	9.8	30.0 (B, D*)	13.6	46
Special interest (e.g. environmental group)	30.6	12.2	20.0	11.2 (A <sup>**</sup> )	43
Senior citizens' group	11.1	19.5	7.5	16.0	42
Local politics	33.3	0.0 (A <sup>***</sup> )	12.5 (A <sup>**</sup> )	5.3 (A <sup>***</sup> )	26
Youth group	0.0 (C*)	0.0 (C <sup>**</sup> )	5.0	0.0 (C <sup>**</sup> )	2
Parents' group	0.0	0.0	2.5	0.6	2
<b>Number of fields in which one respondent participates (means)</b>	3.6	2.6	2.7	2.2 (A <sup>**</sup> )	2.5

<sup>a</sup> Multiple responses were allowed. Therefore, percentages indicate shares of respondents of Type X, who ticked the respective option. In the questionnaires, each option was illustrated with examples given in parentheses.

<sup>b</sup> The Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to compare the fields of participation of the four groups. Statistically significant differences are highlighted: \*p ≤ 0.1, \*\*p ≤ 0.05 and \*\*\*p ≤ 0.001. Upper-case letters preceding the asterisks indicate the groups (A–D) with significantly different percentages relative to other groups.

**Table 3**  
 Descriptions of the types of participative practices and reasons for participation.<sup>a,b</sup>

	Participative practices				Total
	Time-intensive, high responsibility (A)	Time-intensive, low responsibility (B)	Little time, high responsibility (C)	Little time, low responsibility (D)	
<b>Reasons for participation (means)</b>					
<b>Community-related reasons</b>					
To meet people	3.3	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.2
To contribute to the community	3.3	2.9 (A <sup>**</sup> )	3.1	3.1	3.1
To maintain cultural traditions	3.2	2.7 (A <sup>**</sup> )	2.8	2.9	2.9
<b>Self-related reasons</b>					
I enjoy the activities	3.0	3.1	2.8	2.9	3.0
For my own health and well-being	2.8	3.1	2.8	3.0	3.0
Self-interest	3.1	3.0	3.0	2.8	2.9
To gain new skills	2.3	2.4	2.3	2.1	2.2
<b>External pressures</b>					
If I don't do it, no-one else will	2.3	1.7 (A*)	2.2	1.9	2.0
Other people expect me to be involved	2.2	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.8

<sup>a</sup> A four-point scale (1 = not important; 4 = very important) was used to respond to the following question: “How important are each of the following reasons for your involvement in the local community?”

<sup>b</sup> The Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to compare the reasons for participation for the four groups. Statistically significant differences are highlighted: \*p ≤ 0.1, \*\*p ≤ 0.05 and \*\*\*p ≤ 0.001. Upper-case letters preceding the asterisks indicate the groups (A–D) with significantly different percentages relative to other groups.

that were linked to external pressure. However, the statements “other people expect me to be involved” and “if I don't do it, no one else will” were rated as important or very important by 23% and 28% of the participants, respectively. As Table 3 shows, differences in mean scores among the four types of participation were generally small. Notably, mean scores for external pressures were higher for the two high responsibility groups (A and C), with time-intensive practices entailing high responsibility levels (A) evidencing the highest mean scores for all community-related reasons as well as external pressures. Statistically significant differences were found between the two groups participating

in time-intensive practices (A and B), as those whose engagement entailed low responsibility showed lower mean scores for community-related reasons and external pressures.

#### 4.1.3. Socio-economic characteristics associated with specific types of participative practices

Respondents in group A with a lot of time and high responsibility levels, tended to be men aged 65–74 years and those living together as couples with no other residents (Table 4). This group had above-average proportions of individuals with high incomes and educational levels. It is

**Table 4**  
A comparison of respondents who engaged in the four types of participative practices based on their socio-economic profiles.<sup>a</sup>

	Participative practices				Total
	Time-intensive, high responsibility (A)	Time-intensive, low responsibility (B)	Little time, high responsibility (C)	Little time, low responsibility (D)	
<b>Total n</b>	36	41	41	169	287
<b>Age groups (%)</b>					
Early retirees (<65)	11.1	12.2	14.6	12.4	12.5
Young-old (65–74)	58.3	70.7	63.4	55.6	59.2
Middle-old (75–84)	27.8	12.2	22.0	27.8	24.7
Oldest-old (>84)	2.8	4.9	0.0	4.1	3.5
<b>Mean Age</b>	71.3	70.0	70.2	71.6	71.1
<b>Gender (%)</b>					
Male	75.0 (D*)	51.2	68.3	52.1	57.1
Female	25.0 (D*)	48.8	31.7	47.9	42.9
<b>Household type (%)</b>					
Live alone	17.6	39.5	17.1	24.8	24.8
Couple, no other residents	70.6	42.1 (A*, C**, D**)	75.6	66.7	65.1
Couple or single parent with (adult) children	2.9	15.8 (A*, C*, D**)	2.4	4.2	5.4
Three (or more) generations	2.9	0.0	2.4	1.8	1.8
Other	5.9	2.6	2.4	2.4	2.9
<b>Net equivalent income (%)</b>					
Low	22.6	24.2	24.3	29.7	27.3
Medium	38.7	48.5	59.5	52.0	51.0
High	38.7 (D*)	27.3	16.2	18.2	21.7
<b>Education (%)</b>					
Low	41.2	59.0	47.5	52.1	51.1
Medium	26.5	35.9	30.0	27.9	29.1
High	32.4 (B**)	5.1	22.5	20.0	19.8

<sup>a</sup> The Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to compare the socio-economic profiles of respondents in the four groups. Statistically significant differences are highlighted; \*p ≤ 0.1, \*\*p ≤ 0.05 and \*\*\*p ≤ 0.001. Upper-case letters preceding asterisks indicate the groups (A–D) with significantly different percentages relative to other groups.

also noteworthy that both of the *high responsibility* groups (A and C) had the highest proportions of couples living together without other residents.

#### 4.2. Rationales for not participating in the local community

To elucidate the rationales for not participating in the local community, we conducted a thematic analysis following the method of Braun and Clarke, which facilitates the identification of “patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (2012, p. 57) linked to the specific research question. Additionally, thematic analysis is recommended for analysing open-ended survey responses (Terry and Braun, 2017). For this study, we selected an inductive approach to the data in which data-based meanings were prioritised over theory-driven ones.<sup>5</sup> After we had generated initial codes, we searched for themes within the data. Three themes were identified on the basis of 15 codes in total: *personal reasons*, a *critical attitude towards or rejection of practices and participants* and *unspecified*. Among respondents who stated that they did not participate in the local community, 32% did not respond to this question and were coded as missing. In a few cases, more than one code was assigned to a response. After re-reading these responses, we assigned the dominant code to them. The most frequently occurring theme was *personal reasons* for non-participation (74%), whereas *critical attitudes* and *unspecified* were dominant themes in only 16% and 10% of the coded responses, respectively. The theme *unspecified* has not been included in the following descriptions and analyses because it lacked explanatory power (Table 5).

##### 4.2.1. Personal reasons

*Personal reasons* relating to health and age were the main reasons for older respondents’ non-participation within the community, accounting

<sup>5</sup> We do, however, acknowledge that inductive approaches are never completely detached from prior knowledge and experiences.

**Table 5**  
The two main rationales for non-participation that emerged from identified codes and themes via thematic analysis.<sup>a</sup>

	Rationales for non-participation (themes)		Total
	Personal reasons (E)	Critical attitude or rejection (F)	
<b>Total n</b>	56	12	68
<b>Reasons for not participating (%)</b>			
Health	42.9		35.3
Age	21.4		17.6
Family-related responsibilities	10.7		8.8
Participation elsewhere	5.4		4.4
No time (unspecific)	3.6		2.9
(Recent) move	3.6		2.9
Work-related responsibilities	1.8		1.5
Preference for solitude/flexibility	3.6		2.9
No connection with local community	3.6	8.3	4.4
Critique of people (local and/or involved)		50.0	8.8
Critique of local opportunities		33.3	5.9
Bad experience(s) in the past		8.3	1.5
No desire	1.8		1.5
Unclear	1.8		1.5

<sup>a</sup> The codes in the first column were identified within the open-ended responses to the question: “If you’re not involved in the local community: Could you please shortly explain why?”. Two main themes emerged from the codes.

for 47% of all responses of non-participants. Family responsibilities,

**Table 6**

A comparison of non-participating respondents according to their socio-economic profiles.<sup>a</sup>

	Rationales for non-participation		Total
	Personal reasons (E)	Critical attitude or rejection (F)	
<b>Total n</b>	56	12	68
<b>Age groups (%)</b>			
Early retirees (<65)	14.3	25.0	16.2
Young-old (65–74)	50.0	41.7	48.5
Middle-old (75–84)	26.8	33.3	27.9
Oldest-old (>84)	8.9	0.0	7.4
<b>Mean Age</b>	72.0	67.8	71.2
<b>Gender (%)</b>			
Male	51.8	41.7	50.0
Female	48.2	58.3	50.0
<b>Household type (%)</b>			
Live alone	29.1	33.3	29.9
Couple, no other residents	54.5	50.0	53.7
Couple or single parent with (adult) children	5.5	16.7	7.5
Three (or more) generations	1.8	0.0	1.5
Other	9.1	0.0	7.5
<b>Net equivalent income</b>			
Low	42.9	25.0	38.9
Medium	52.4	33.3	48.1
High	4.8	41.7 (E***)	13.0
<b>Education (%)</b>			
Low	57.1	50.0	55.7
Medium	28.6	33.3	29.5
High	14.3	16.7	14.8

<sup>a</sup> The Mann-Whitney-U test was conducted to compare the socio-economic information of respondents in the two groups. Statistically significant differences are highlighted; \*p ≤ 0.1, \*\*p ≤ 0.05 and \*\*\*p ≤ 0.001. Upper-case letters preceding asterisks indicate the groups (E-F) with significantly different percentages relative to other groups.

participation elsewhere and a lack of connection to the community were also identified as rationales. Some respondents noted that they had just moved to this locality, pointing to “the lack of private contacts” (R 3761<sup>6</sup>). Another respondent stated that “this village is not the centre of my life, I am here too infrequently” (R 3473). Others attributed non-participation to a high level of mobility: “I am on the road a lot/the children live far away” (R 4053). Family-related responsibilities, such as caring for partners, were mentioned several times, and some respondents observed that they preferred to spend their free time on other activities. Thus, the responses in this category yielded information about the individual respondents.

**Table 7**

A comparison of residential histories among groups reporting different forms of (non-)participation.<sup>a,b</sup>

	Participation				Total	Non-participation		Total
	Time-intensive, high responsibility (A)	Time-intensive, low responsibility (B)	Little time, high responsibility (C)	Little time, low responsibility (D)		Personal reasons (E)	Critical attitude or rejection (F)	
<b>Residential history (%)</b>								
Village stayer	46.2	40.6	42.4	38.0	39.9	27.9	22.2	26.9
Regional stayers	7.7	21.9	24.2	19.0	18.9	25.6	11.1	23.1
Returnees	3.8	12.5	15.2	14.6	13.2	9.3	0.0	7.7
Incomers	42.3	25.0	18.2	28.5	28.1	37.2	66.7	42.3

<sup>a</sup> Respondents were asked detailed information about their residential history, starting with their place of birth. They recorded each place of residence and the duration of their residence. Accordingly, we identified the above types of residential histories.

<sup>b</sup> We performed the Kruskal-Wallis test to compare the residential histories of respondents in the four participative groups and the two non-participative groups. There were no statistically significant differences among the groups at p ≤ 0.1.

<sup>6</sup> Each survey respondent was assigned an ID number.

4.2.2. Critical attitudes towards or rejection of practices and participants

The quotes categorised under this theme were critical statements made about the local inhabitants in general or those involved in community activities. In some cases, they were connected with the respondents’ personal situations: “I have little to no connection with the community. I would still be seen as a foreigner” (R 3104). Others characterised the concerned individuals as “dowdy” or “conservative” (R 3807). One respondent linked his negative opinion of people to their residential context, observing that “only village idiots” (R 4903) participate, thereby distancing himself from them. Two respondents also mentioned “slander” (R 3596) and “garrulity” (R 3822), indicating disappointing past experiences. These and other responses highlight the importance of feeling accepted and having a good opinion of the participating individuals as motivating factors for becoming or staying involved. Another code associated with this theme was reflected in responses that were critical of local opportunities and structures, some of which could be interpreted as demonstrating the respondents’ willingness to participate under conditions in which they had some degree of influence. For example: “it is always the same ones who rise up to speak and do not tolerate any other opinions” (R 3449). Others implied a passive attitude: “there are no interesting opportunities for me here” (R 3180).

4.2.3. Socio-economic characteristics associated with respondents’ rationales for non-participation

Following the identification of the two main rationales for non-participation, we compared the socio-economic information of respondents within these groups (Table 6). Within group F, characterised by *critical attitudes or rejection*, 42% of the respondents were aged 65–74 years, 58% were women, 42% had high income levels and 33% lived alone. Respondents who provided *personal reasons* for not participating (E) comprised the oldest group aged 72 years on average, of whom 9% were 84+ years. Only 5% of respondents in this group reported having high incomes, with 43% reporting having low incomes. A statistically significant difference was only found for high income levels, indicating that whereas respondents with high income levels rarely provided *personal reasons* (E) for non-participation, they accounted for a large percentage of individuals who had a *critical attitude* (F) towards participation.

4.3. Interrelations between (non-)participation and residential histories

As discussed in Section 2.4, complex interrelations among residential



histories and community participation have been reported in the literature. We investigated these associations by comparing the respondents' residential histories across the four groups of participants and the two groups of non-participants. These histories were elicited by asking respondents to name each of their places of residence, starting with their childhood homes, and duration of residence in each place. This information yielded four types of residential histories. Table 7 reveals that the largest group of respondents within the sample were village stayers (38%), implying that they had lived in the same village since birth. A smaller group comprised regional stayers (19%), who had always lived in the area of the former administrative district of Osterode and at some point in their lives had moved to the study region. The smallest group (11%) were returnees to Osterode, and had thus been raised in the region, moved elsewhere at some point and had eventually returned to live in the area under study. The second largest group comprised incomers (31%), who had moved to the region from elsewhere in Germany.

When we examined and compared the proportions of residential histories of the four groups of participants and the two groups of non-participants, we did not detect statistically significant differences, which may partly be attributed to small absolute numbers. Nevertheless, some interesting patterns in the data were evident. We found that village stayers and incomers respectively accounted for 46% and 42% of *time-intensive* practices with *high responsibility* levels (A). Thus, the proportions of village stayers and incomers who participated in *time-intensive* practices with *high responsibility* levels (A) were almost equal. A closer look at the non-participating groups showed that 33% of the respondents who were *critical of local practices and participants* (F) were village or regional stayers, while 67% were incomers. Thus, incomers represented a much larger proportion of respondents with a *critical attitude towards local practices and participants* (F).

## 5. Discussion

We addressed our first research question on the ways in which older people participate in their local communities in a declining and ageing rural area by conducting a hierarchical cluster analysis focusing on the types of participation, followed by a thematic analysis to determine the reasons for non-participation. Within our sample, 75% of the respondents – retired people and non-retired people older than 65 years – participated to some extent in the local community. The participation of a substantial majority was characterised by *little time* and a *low responsibility* level, with smaller proportions of respondents investing more time and responsibility. Across all groups, respondents participated most frequently in the fields of sport and leisure, annual community events, culture, informal volunteering and community development. This diversity of fields supports the notion of selective participation (Gielsing et al., 2018) and the existence of several partially overlapping communities within the villages (Massey, 2016). The low proportion of individuals engaged in religious activities suggests the diminishing importance of this traditional field of participation. The even smaller proportion of respondents who participated in local politics was predominantly male; a finding that concurs with those of other studies on political participation in Germany (Simonson et al., 2017). This difference between men and women could be interpreted as the outcome of traditional gender roles (Notz, 2010). Accordingly, we see the production of gendered spaces of participation as an important topic for future research. In line with previous research, we identified community- and self-related motives as important factors, with most people participating for multiple reasons (Mettenberger and Küpper, 2019). Our results support the notion that participation and volunteering within rural communities are “more than simply the delivery of front-line activities and services. Volunteering is a social activity, critical to the societal fabric of rural communities and the wellbeing of residents” (Davies et al., 2021, p. 142). Additionally, for about a quarter of the participants, external pressures were important or very important, especially for those who already assumed responsibility. Accordingly, community

participation was not only intrinsically motivated, but to a lesser extent, it was also extrinsically motivated. As Ryan and Deci have pointed out, the degree of internalization of motivation is influenced by the social context (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 68). Local stakeholders, such as organizations and groups looking for volunteers, should therefore evaluate their means of creating social contexts which are conducive to motivating others.

The remaining 25% of the respondents in our sample did not participate in the local community. Similar to Ubels et al. (2020), we found that personal considerations, such as health issues, age and family responsibilities, were the main reasons for non-participation. From a life course perspective, this finding highlights specific characteristics of the retirement life stage, in which personal health and limited capabilities as well as links to other family members – especially through care work for partners – dominate the everyday rhythms of many individuals. In addition, 15% of the participants' responses revealed a *critical attitude towards or rejection of practices and participants*. As the open-ended responses only provided a first impression, future qualitative research should focus on eliciting the personal narratives that frame these reasons. Some of the critical responses as well as *personal reasons* for non-participation, such as age and health issues, point to the exclusion of older people with limited physical mobility from community activities (Jarvis and Mountain, 2021). While many of these individuals may have intentionally decided not to participate for the above reasons, it is important to note that previous studies have reported the exclusion of particular groups “unless explicit efforts are made to include them” (Cornwall, 2008, p. 277). Potential strategies that can be applied by municipalities or by other local actors include, for example, the organization of transportation to particular places and the maintenance or creation of barrier-free spaces for participation associated with diverse purposes. Additionally, engaging with critics of participation could be beneficial for understanding problems, developing new ideas for shared activities as well as improving communication between different communities within a village.

We brought the two rationales for non-participation and the four identified types of participative practices together along a spectrum of (non-)participation within the local community. This spectrum reveals similarities and differences relative to other typologies presented in previous studies on participation. The qualitative approach adopted by Mettenberger and Küpper (2019) entailed thick descriptions of two extreme types of participants, while the quantitative approach adopted by Gielsing and Haartsen (2017, p. 576) included non-participants besides “nominal participants and active participants”. Our methodological approach introduces a nuanced spectrum of (non-)participation to this literature, which we subsequently used to answer our second research question on how participative practices are linked to individuals' residential histories.

Our analyses indicated that both incomers to the region and village stayers were represented across the entire spectrum of (non-)participation. The proportions of incomers and village stayers were almost equal for *time-intensive* practices associated with *high responsibility* levels. However, slight differences were found relating to other forms of (non-)participation. Our results suggest a tendency for incomers to be either strongly involved or completely uninvolved in the community and to be more likely to be critical of local community activities. By contrast, village stayers were inclined to participate – even if they only had a *little time* and accepted a *low* level of *responsibility* – and were less critical. Our results thus challenge stereotypical images, such as the non-involved incomer, as well as a simplistic division between incomers and village stayers with regard to their participation. This finding is similar to that of Gielsing et al. (2017) on the place attachment of these groups.

Some methodological issues require discussion. Firstly, we assume that social desirability connected to local community participation influenced respondents' answers to some extent. Secondly, our results should be interpreted cautiously given the small numbers of respondents for some of the identified types of (non-)participation (Tables 4 and 6).

Thirdly, we want to draw attention to the potential loss of culturally-specific meanings in the process of translating the German questionnaire for this English publication (Germes and Hussein de Araújo, 2016). Fourthly, we acknowledge that practices relating to community participation and informal support structures are culturally and context specific (Wang et al., 2019). While case studies facilitate a comprehensive understanding of a particular context as well as analytic generalizations (Yin, 2014), future studies should also entail comparative approaches. Lastly, studies applying practice theory combined with ethnographic methods can contribute to a deeper understanding of participative practices.

## 6. Conclusion

In a context of centralised public and private services, ageing populations and increasing political attention to productive ageing in rural Europe, this case study examined older individuals' participative practices and their reasons for not participating in their local communities. We observed that the main reasons for participation are self-related, indicating that many villagers see their participation within the community as benefitting themselves. In light of the political objective of 'keeping' residents within shrinking rural areas, the focus at regional, national and European scales on supporting local participation evidently makes sense. Our results also showed that differing residential histories only partially accounted for the decision on whether to participate. We did, however, find that incomers represented a larger share of non-participants and a smaller share of participants compared with village stayers. Nevertheless, a more nuanced examination of participative practices and the reasons for non-participation draws attention to the diversity within the two groups relating to both participation and non-participation, thereby challenging "a traditional local versus newcomer divide" (Gielsing et al., 2017, p. 238). An important finding emerging from our analysis is that participation in rural communities depends on individuals' health and, to some extent, on their gender, as men are more often in positions of responsibility and generally less critical of local opportunities for participation than women. In light of the increasing emphasis on older people's responsibility for maintaining local quality of life in rural areas, we argue that it is necessary to create awareness of these imbalances and of groups of non-participants (Ubels et al., 2020). Regional and local actors need to find ways of co-creating local communities and improving quality of life that also accommodate non-participants' interests, as their needs may not otherwise be met. Additionally, strategies that support individuals in more responsible positions can be helpful, as such people are often involved in multiple voluntary activities and experience external pressures to be in or stay in these positions. Lastly, the diverse forms of participation that we found are striking, revealing the extent to which older rural residents are already shaping their communities.

## Credit author statement

**Franziska Lengerer:** Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Visualization. **Annett Steinführer:** Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. **Tialda Haartsen:** Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – review & editing.

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## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

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