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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Trang Le, T. H., & Kolleck, N. (2022). The Power of Places in Building Cultural and Arts Education Networks and Cooperation in Rural Areas. *Social Inclusion*, 10(3), 284-294. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i3.5299>

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Article

The Power of Places in Building Cultural and Arts Education Networks and Cooperation in Rural Areas

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Submitted: 24 January 2022 | Accepted: 6 July 2022 | Published: 20 September 2022

Abstract

Volunteering plays a central role in cultural and arts education in rural areas in Germany. However, a decrease in the number of volunteers in structurally weak regions can be observed in recent years. This poses existential challenges for cultural and arts education. The promotion of social networks and regional cooperation, as well as a sense of place, can counteract this decline. This article aims to explore how sense of place influence cooperation and thus social networks between actors of different institutions in the context of cultural and arts education in rural areas. A total of 34 interviews and egocentric network maps were conducted with different local actors (e.g., volunteers in the theatre association, mayors, etc.) in four municipalities. The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Our results show that, through active participation in cultural events and associations, new cooperation is created and maintained, which also expands the social network. This active participation can be positively influenced by the existing attachment to the region and cultural places.

Keywords

cooperation; cultural and arts education; qualitative research; sense of place; social networks

Issue

This article is part of the issue “On the Role of Space, Place, and Social Networks in Social Participation” edited by Gil Viry (University of Edinburgh), Christoph van Dülmen (Thünen Institute of Rural Studies), Marion Maisonobe (CNRS), and Andreas Klärner (Thünen Institute of Rural Studies).

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1. Introduction

In recent years, cultural and arts education has increasingly gained importance in academic, political, and public discourses (Liebau, 2018, p. 1221). The rising attention is based on high expectations of positive impacts, such as the promotion of political engagement (Fobel & Kolleck, 2021, p. 324), personal development (e.g., Hallam, 2010), and social participation (e.g., German Bundestag, 2007). These effects are indispensable for the promotion of regional development (German Bundestag, 2007, p. 9) due to increasing regional disparities (Authoring Group of the National Education Report, 2018, p. 15) and low trust in the political system (Kenny & Luca, 2021, pp. 19–20).

The field of cultural and arts education is characterised by diversity, heterogeneity, and complexity (Liebau, 2018, p. 1221). It can be said that grassroots cultural infrastructures (e.g., country women’s clubs, scouts, carnival clubs) are more likely to be found in rural areas. Grassroots culture encompasses a broad, diverse concept of culture and thus also many forms of cultural and artistic activities (German Bundestag, 2005; Kegler et al., 2017). Finally, this concept can contain features of high-brow culture (e.g., amateur music ensemble) and low-brow culture (e.g., school band) on the content level (German Bundestag, 2005, pp. 3–4). This kind of cultural and arts education tends to be organised in associations, receives little public funding, and runs mainly voluntarily (German Bundestag, 2005; Kegler et al., 2017). However,

rural areas are confronted with dynamic change processes, such as demographic change (BMFSFJ, 2017, p. 477), migration (Priemer et al., 2019, p. 19) and advancing urbanisation (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2016, p. 68). These exert a strong influence on local cultural engagement (BMFSFJ, 2017, p. 477).

Studies show that the number of voluntary activities in the cultural sector has increased and the percentage of volunteers in rural areas has been higher than in urban regions for years (Paarlberg et al., 2022; Priemer et al., 2019). At the same time, a downward trend in association membership in structurally weak regions can be observed, which is attributed, for example, to the declining number of inhabitants in rural areas (Priemer et al., 2019, p. 20). One possible approach to promoting volunteering, especially in the field of cultural and arts education in rural areas, is to strengthen social networks and regional cooperation on the one hand (German Bundestag, 2007, pp. 141–142) and a sense of place on the other (Gooch, 2003; Newman et al., 2017).

A social network consists of actors who are connected through social relations (Fuhse, 2018; Payer, 2008). Active cooperative relationships can serve as the basis of networks. Furthermore, existing cooperative relationships can foster new social contacts and thus also relationships (Payer, 2008, p. 13). In recent years, the topic of cultural and arts education in connection with social networks and cooperation in rural areas has received increased attention. Accordingly, the focus is on cooperation and networking between local actors from different institutions in the cultural sector. Nevertheless, hardly any studies can be found on this topic. Instead, especially in Germany, there are either programmatic cultural policy and practice-oriented publications (e.g., Institut für Kulturpolitik der Kulturpolitischen Gesellschaft, 2015) or there has been more research on social capital—which can be described as a resource of social networks (Lin, 1999, p. 35) and cultural participation (Burton & Griffin, 2008; Wilks, 2011).

In addition to social networks and cooperation, a sense of place can also function as a catalyst for promoting volunteering (Gooch, 2003; Newman et al., 2017). Referring to Gooch (2003, p. 9), feelings of belonging to certain places can be an important factor for long-term volunteering, especially in rural areas. While the link between social networks and a sense of place has already been discussed (Acedo et al., 2017; Mihaylov et al., 2020), cultural and arts education in rural areas has received little attention in empirical studies. Instead, studies on cultural places (such as libraries or cultural centres) as a lubricator for social interactions, for example, can be found (e.g., Svendsen & Svendsen, 2016). Thereby, a sense of place can strengthen the cohesion within a community and is thus more likely to form long-term cooperation and social networks between different local people (Acedo et al., 2017, pp. 512–513), which is indispensable for securing cultural and arts education (German Bundestag, 2007, pp. 141–142).

Due to this dearth of studies, this article shows how a sense of place contributes to the development of cooperation, which is seen as the foundation of social networks, and thus also to the maintenance of cultural programmes and engagement. To understand how social networks in the cultural sector can be fostered and expanded through the physical environment, it is important to clarify how cooperation emerges. Hence, the following question arises: How does local people's sense of place influence cooperation and social networks in cultural and arts education in rural areas in Germany? A brief theoretical introduction to social networks and cooperation as well as sense of place is given. This is followed by a description of the recruiting process, data material, and data interpretation. Seven subcategories were developed during the analysis and are examined in more detail in the fourth section. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our results.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Social Networks and Cooperation

A network consists of nodes connected by lines. Nodes in a social network can represent actors such as institutions, organisations, groups, or individuals. These actors are connected through social relationships (Fuhse, 2018; Payer, 2008). In this context, cooperation is seen as the basis for social networks. Cooperation is defined as an alliance between at least two actors who share a common goal and exchange mutual resources—e.g., money, information, and time (Payer, 2008; Quilling, 2013). Recent studies show that participation in cultural activities has a positive impact on social interactions and networks (e.g., Laing & Mair, 2015; Lizardo, 2013). Consequently, new social relationships may be formed through cultural participation (Laing & Mair, 2015, p. 264), which can also expand social networks (Lizardo, 2013, p. 321). Vice versa, networks also play a crucial role in securing and expanding cultural infrastructures (Schneider, 2017, p. 38). According to Born (2016, p. 17), associations in rural areas work closely together by sharing infrastructures and carrying out collaborative projects. For example, actors from different sectors (e.g., retail, art associations, volunteer fire brigade) are involved in the joint organisation of events. Such cooperative relationships are less contractually regulated and tend to take place on an informal level, which is why the cooperation of the respective actors can depend heavily on personality (Born, 2016, pp. 17–18). Social networks can be secured and expanded through active cooperation. The network can in turn function as a breeding ground and pool for new social relationships, which can also give rise to new cooperation (Payer, 2008, pp. 11–14).

Meeting places such as libraries, churches, and clubs can act as an incubator for social interactions in this context (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2016; van Dülmen & Klärner,

2022). Accordingly, the promotion of cultural and arts education in rural areas also requires places where cultural activities are carried out, cultural offers are implemented, and social networks are organised. Conversely, the function of certain places, such as libraries, is fulfilled if social actions are created in them (Schneider, 2017, p. 38).

2.2. Basic Theoretical Assumptions of Sense of Place

Descriptions of relationships between people and places are usually associated with the concept of “sense of place” (Hashemnezhad et al., 2013; Kianicka et al., 2006). This concept encompasses a person’s accumulated, place-based experiences (Kianicka et al., 2006, p. 55) and the resulting attachment to specific places (Stokowski, 2002, p. 368). This connection is reinforced primarily through the physical environment and the ensuing sentiments for certain places (Stokowski, 2002, p. 368). External environmental characteristics such as smell, sound, and landscape, for example, can evoke special images and perceptions of place. Correspondingly, various influencing factors contribute to the development of a sense of place, which is why the attachment to a particular place is also formed differently for different people (Hashemnezhad et al., 2013, p. 7).

Sense of place is a complex construct (Pretty et al., 2003, p. 274) and encompasses several various sub-concepts and phenomena (Kianicka et al., 2006, p. 55). These include, for example, place attachment, place dependence, and place identity (Jorgens & Stedman, 2001, p. 234). While sense of place according to Hashemnezhad et al. (2013, p. 11) includes all forms of perception, feelings, and experiences of certain places, the concept of place attachment focuses on positive feelings that arise during human-environment interactions. Accordingly, it is an effect caused by emotional bonding to a specific place (Pretty et al., 2003, p. 273). In contrast, place dependency is conceptualised as personal goal attainment, which is primarily enabled by the given physical environment (Jorgens & Stedman, 2001, p. 234). As an example, individuals may develop personal goals within the context of their hobby such as white-water rafting. However, this can only be realised insofar as suitable fast, rushing rivers are present in the surroundings. Consequently, individuals with special goals are dependent on a certain physical setting (White et al., 2008, p. 649). Another sub-concept of sense of place is place identity. Here, the focus is on the formation of identity, which is influenced by different individual characteristics such as norms and values, feelings, (conscious or unconscious) ideas of place as well as by the physical environment (Proshansky, 1978, p. 155).

2.3. Integration of Social Networks and Sense of Place

Several scholars have tried to relate the concept of sense of place to social networks within communities. Perkins

and Long (2002, p. 293) followed a community psychological and spatial perspective and developed four concepts: sense of community, neighbouring, collective efficacy, and citizen participation. In terms of the literature, sense of community refers to the connection between people within a group or community and their belonging to the neighbourhood (Mannarini et al., 2006, p. 204). Persons who feel affiliated to a community thus receive the benefit of reciprocity and solidarity. In contrast, the concept of neighbouring takes a closer look at social relationships and symbolic interactions. Neighbourhoods are not only based on social networks but the collective attachment to the place of residence. Finally, neighbourhoods are created through social and spatial proximity (Unger & Wandersman, 1985, p. 141). Another concept is collective efficacy. This encompasses collective norms and values that are developed within a community, as well as influencing the emergence of organised, communal action (Perkins & Long, 2002, p. 295). Another conception is civic participation. Participating individuals can determine both the mode of participation and the goal (Rich et al., 1995, pp. 659–660), and are predominantly concerned with local needs, such as street festivals or the designing of parks (Perkins & Long, 2002, p. 296). It can thus be concluded that civic participation is an important resource for adapting and shaping the physical and social environment.

In summary, the spatial aspect plays an important role in all concepts, which is why these are often associated with sense of place (Acedo et al., 2017; Billig, 2005; Pretty et al., 2003). Sense of place is not only created by the connection between an individual and a place, but also between people (Pretty et al., 2003, p. 274), and is thus a product of social interactions (Butz & Eyles, 1997, p. 23). According to Mihaylov et al. (2020, p. 162), social networks can act as a catalyst for the development of place-based communities since a collective consensus of ideas and perceptions of place emerge through social interactions. Consequently, a sense of community can be built through a sense of place so that an environment for cooperation and social networks between different actors is created simultaneously (Acedo et al., 2017, pp. 512–513). In contrast, however, too strong a sense of place can also have negative effects on the expansion of social networks, especially in smaller communities. For example, people with a strong sense of place may be sceptical about innovative transformation processes and have difficulties being open to new, unfamiliar newcomers, which may lead to exclusion (Dale et al., 2008, p. 267).

3. Methodological Approach

This study aims to understand how local people’s sense of place influences cooperation and social networks in the context of cultural and arts education in rural areas. Due to the dearth of studies in this area, an exploratory research design was used. A total of 34 semi-structured

interviews in combination with the hierarchical mapping technique were conducted in four structurally weak regions. Finally, the interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using qualitative content analysis.

3.1. Recruiting and Data Collection

The data collection took place in four rural, peripheral areas across Germany (two from East Germany and two from West Germany), each belonging to a different federal state. Just as there is a variety of rural areas, there are also different cultural infrastructures (Institut für Kulturpolitik der Kulturpolitischen Gesellschaft, 2015, p. 34), which is why we have examined several regions in more detail. Despite the difference in cultural infrastructures, the focus of this study is to identify common conditions for promoting social relations as well as cooperation and thus also social networks. For a closer examination of social networks and cooperation between different institutions, we recruited cultural and arts education practitioners from various sectors (e.g., theatre association, museum, rural women's association), as well as their cooperation partners (e.g., other cultural professionals and voluntaries, mayors). To explore possible hindering conditions, other cultural and arts educators who are not part of the network of our cooperation partners were also recruited. To obtain homogeneous as well as heterogeneous cases and because of the explorative character of this study, we chose theoretical sampling for the selection of interviewees. The characteristics of the corpus were not defined in advance but developed during data collection and analysis.

Between June and November 2020, a total of 34 interviews (plus three pre-tests to revise the interview guide) ranging from 42 to 148 minutes were conducted based on a semi-standardised interview guide. The interview guide included egocentric network maps according to Kahn and Antonucci (1980) to stimulate narratives concerning the interviewees' personal relationships. Semi-standardised interviews offer the advantage of structuring, flexibility, and openness of the interview. The conversation was thematically divided into four sections: description of the position within the institution, social ties and cooperation, visualised network, and open topics. As narrative stimuli, the first question was about how the participants came to volunteer or work in their institution. Concerning this, a follow-up question about the activities and tasks of the interviewees was given. In this way, first insights into the respective institutions and the activities of the participants as such could be provided. In this telling of stories, current cooperation was often already mentioned, so these could be taken up in more detail in the topic area of social ties and cooperation. Using different narrative questions, for example, current cooperation partners could be identified, and the perception and description of the respective cooperation could be asked in more detail. For instance, the fol-

lowing question was asked: "You have just talked about person X. How did this cooperation arise?"

Egocentric network maps were used to stimulate narrations on the one hand and to visualise personal networks on the other (Hollstein & Pfeffer, 2010, p. 6). According to Hollstein and Pfeffer (2010, p. 2), there are three different types of network maps: unstructured, structured and standardised, and structured and unstandardised. Due to contact restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted by telephone. For this reason, structured, standardised network maps were used, which offer little room for respondent creativity compared to the other two types but allow for direct instructions during the implementation of the hierarchical mapping technique (Hollstein & Pfeffer, 2010, p. 7). In this way, the complexity of the application of this instrument could be reduced and thus a possible mental overload could be largely avoided. These visualisation tools were sent by post in advance of the interviews. The cooperation partners already identified during the interview could therefore be integrated into this procedure.

During the use of the hierarchical mapping technique, the participants were asked to put their cooperation partners on the egocentric network map. As the interview took place by telephone, the interviewees were asked to describe where each person was located on the map and to give reasons for this. The primary aim was not to map the entire network but to generate more detailed information about the respective social relationships during the conversation. Finally, social ties are important factors to understand and analyse social networks (Bernhard, 2018, p. 1). At last, the participants were given the opportunity to talk about other topics that were not mentioned or discussed in depth during the conversation. As evident, the importance of places was not explicitly asked in the interviews. Instead of this, this had only emerged during the conversation and analysis.

3.2. Data Analysis

As the network maps were mainly used to gain further information and were deeply involved in the conversations, only the interview data was analysed to answer the research question. After all, networks and thus social relations can be found and identified in stories (Bernhard, 2018, p. 3). To analyse the data, a qualitative content analysis approach according to Kuckartz (2014) was used. This is a rule-based and systematic methodology that aims to develop a content-analytical system of categories.

First, case summaries were written to get a rough overview of the data material. Subsequently, the main category *region and its cultural socialisation* was developed from the material. This was thematically defined in a codebook and tested through consensual coding. In the subsequent phases, data were coded using the

main category system and subcategories were inductively formed based on these coded passages. To answer the research questions, seven subcategories were created, which were subdivided into three areas: *sense of cultural community*, *sense of cultural places*, and *sense of region* (see Table 1).

Finally, to shed more light on the connection between places and social ties, both spatial subcategories (*regional attachment and perception*; *historical and ecological influences*; *decline of services of general interest and spatial mobility*; *personal bonding to cultural places*; *cultural places*) and social subcategories (*cultural participation*; *region-specific, cultural programmes*) were formed. The spatial categories focus more on the perception of the place-based environment, while the social categories highlight the framework for making new social contacts. These subcategories were also tested and defined in the codebook (see Table 1). During further analysis, category-based summaries were written and their interrelationships explored.

4. Results

This section has been subdivided into segments regarding (a) sense of region, (b) sense of cultural places, (c) sense of cultural community, and (d) connections between the subcategories and their influence on the emergence of cooperation and social networks. Accordingly, the respective subcategories are briefly described in the first three subsections. Subsequently, it is explained in more detail how the respective subcategories relate to each other and how these subcategories are connected to the emergence and strengthening of cooperation and thus also social networks in the field of cultural and arts education in rural areas.

4.1. Sense of Region

The interviewees often refer to their region without being explicitly asked. They show a close *relationship and attachment to the region*, which is mainly shaped by their experiences. One interviewed mayor said: “Basically, it has to do with the fact that if you grew up here in the region, [the region] is a very big identity factor for you in terms of home.” Growing up in the region is implicitly associated with local experiences, which are particularly influential during the first phase of life. However, the respondents perceive a lack of public interest in their communities, which fosters a sense of existential threat: “There are many economically minded people in the area who say that it is much more efficient and economically simpler and more economical overall if I let the rural areas die off and only think and develop in centres” (staff member in a cultural department). Here, the interviewee refers to the state and federal governments. This indicates that the politicians demand economic growth from the municipalities, but rural areas are not able to meet these expectations. In this way, the emergence of a communal “we-are-detached-feeling” (staff member of a cultural department) is promoted. The feeling of neglect on the part of the public interest seems to be shaped by *historical influences*. This is illustrated by the following quote:

No, we are, the [district] is such a small triangle, which more or less protruded like a corner into the area of the former GDR....That means we were far away from the large conurbations, and still are today. There is hardly any or virtually no industry here. Companies only settle here on a modest scale. That means it’s simple, it’s provincial, it’s an impoverished district. (staff member in a cultural department)

Table 1. Summary of the codebook.

	Subcategory	Description
sense of region	Regional attachment and perception	Descriptions and evaluations of the rural region are coded for this purpose.
	Historical and ecological influences	Narratives on regional history, settlement structure, and influence on the natural environment are assigned to this category.
	Decline of services of general interest and spatial mobility	This refers to the existing perception and description of the decline of basic infrastructures, such as schools and shopping facilities, as well as mobility.
sense of cultural places	Personal bonding to cultural places	Description of the personal attachment and subjective experiences to certain places or buildings are assigned to this.
	Cultural places	This category includes perceptions and descriptions of the use of places.
sense of cultural community	Cultural participation	This category is about which programmes interviewees participate in culturally and make new social contacts in the process.
	Region-specific, cultural programmes	This category is about cultural programmes that were created to archive and communicate historical-cultural events and are dependent on social relations for the purpose.

The terms “corner” and “far away” indicate a feeling of a lack of integration into society, which is due to historical and spatial factors alone. The municipality thus occupies an outsider position, unable to keep up with other municipalities despite its efforts. This indicates the influence of the historical and political course and the spatial conditions on the community.

Another recurring theme mentioned by respondents is the *decline of services of general interest* in the respective regions: “The schools were cancelled in our village. So [in the village] there were no more schools, they practically disappeared, let’s say....And yes, bakers, it was no longer worth it” (volunteer in a theatre club). This issue can influence cultural and arts education in rural areas. The interviews indicate that some cultural institutions have difficulties in attracting members from certain age groups due to the lack of certain services of general interest:

This means that all pupils who leave the fourth grade then naturally go to the music school there, where they also have the afternoon off school. So, if they are in grammar school, then they go to the music school in [town 1] or in [town 2] directly afterwards, but not in [our small town]. (head of a music school)

This shows that, due to the absence of a secondary school as well as the spatial distance and mobility associated with it, participants in a cultural institution tend to take a pragmatic approach and are more likely to consider cultural offers with the least additional effort, as associated with long journeys. Hence, it is harder for cultural institutions to attract and retain members over an extended period. This indicates that spatial distance and mobility also play an important role in participation in cultural activities.

4.2. Sense of Cultural Places

Based on the data, it can be interpreted that the *bonding to social, cultural places* often grows with a personal connection to the region, which is strengthened above all by specific experiences gained in a particular place: “And I was also converted/baptised and confirmed here in this church and I also have a relationship there” (volunteer in a cultural foundation). In addition to such formative experiences, the personal network also promotes a relationship with certain places. Family in particular plays an important role in the formation of a sense of place, as exemplified by the following:

But now it plays a big role for me, for my child earlier, when he was still at primary school, because I went to all the festivals, and I wanted to show him everything. What’s there and how the people, like my grandma, great grandma, for example, lived and where I was everywhere. (volunteer in a hiking club)

Here it is indicated that the transmission of one’s sense of place is regarded as passing on the tradition to the descendants. This is to ensure that each successor generation has similar experiences of place as their ancestors or at least gains insights into the generation- and place-specific experiences. In this way, sense of place can be promoted. According to the respondents, *cultural places* can be described, for example, as mediators of music and artistic skills (e.g., music schools), as mediators of cultural-historical events (e.g., museums), and as historical buildings (e.g., sights) with unique (architectural) features, which is illustrated in the following quote:

No, this is run by the district, even with modest means, but still, this is an open-air museum; a very special one, because it has a unique selling point. As the name suggests, it focuses on the history of the [village settlements], the [regionally specific village settlements]. (staff member in a cultural department)

The data show that cultural places also function as places of social interactions, where cultural and arts education are declared a common theme. This is illustrated in the following quote, referring to an older, historic music school:

And this house we would like to focus on even more and develop a bit of a museum concept, so to speak, in inverted commas, that people come here to the house. And in general, [my colleague] always says so well, when you come in here, it’s about music. (head of a music school)

At this point, it becomes clear that cultural places can function as a point of attraction for people. In doing so, cultural places can take on different concepts—in this case as a music school and as a museum, which increases the possibility of promoting social interactions. The phrase “when you come in here, it’s about music” also suggests that a musical space is also produced within this structure. However, our interviews also indicate that the development of cultural places does not always attract people and that certain people distance themselves from such events: “Within the local council we are sometimes seen as troublemakers because we endanger the local, I don’t want to say peace, but that on weekends there is a bit more hustle and bustle” (volunteer in a theatre club). This illustrates that some local actors find it difficult to cooperate with the organisers of cultural events. This challenge is based particularly on different conceptions of using places, in the sense of place dependency. Consequently, in the above example, the idea and use of the living space as a place of recreation or rest and the living space as a place of cultural promotion and social interactions contradict each other.

4.3. Sense of Cultural Community

Another important dimension is *cultural participation*. Participation in cultural events offers the advantage that contacts with cooperation partners can be maintained. This is illustrated by the following quote:

Yes, these are the connections [light laughter] that you have, you send each other e-mails. So, it's primarily via e-mails or WhatsApp....Or even the contacts that you have, well, I'm excluding the Corona phase, the contacts that you also see at other events. (volunteer in a cultural foundation)

This quote illustrates that participation in cultural events functions as a means of communication for the cooperating actors. Thus, direct interactions are needed to maintain social relations, which are more likely at cultural events. In addition, the data make clear that active participation in cultural associations promotes social interaction and thus also the formation of social networks and cooperation: "If you are in the association for so long, then you become known, or yes, you just meet once, make return visits and then, yes, then a relationship is built up, I would say" (Fool's Guild Association). At this point, it should be noted that while people become potential cooperation partners through their active cultural participation, a social relationship develops over time through multiple conversations.

Another important subcategory is *region-specific, cultural programmes*. According to the interviewees, cultural programmes are important strategies for influencing the physical environment, as shown by this quote:

The local history society does many events, including a spring festival, an autumn festival and Christmas. And we have tried to beautify our village. For example, all those who were interested had [a workshop] for several years with artists who were with us [in the village]....And we carved a fountain there, or designed the benches downstairs, so we carved the [region-specific stone] ourselves, to do something for the village. (volunteer in a theatre club)

This quotation exemplifies that cultural institutions are important breeding grounds for the promotion of social interactions and potentially also for the emergence of cooperation. However, it seems to be essential that the local people feel responsible to contribute to the village. Accordingly, it can be interpreted as a certain sense of place that positively influences participation in cultural offerings as well as the development of cooperative structures. Conversely, such programmes seem to promote the bond with specific places. Using regional resources (e.g., rocks) as well as the shaping of the physical environment, the respective participants gather intensive, regular experiences of the certain place.

4.4. Connections Between Subcategories and Their Influence on the Emergence of Cooperation and Social Networks

The spatial (*regional attachment and perception; historical and ecological influences; decline of services of general interest and spatial mobility; personal bonding to cultural places; cultural places*) and social (*cultural participation; region-specific, cultural programmes*) subcategories identified in our analyses cannot always be clearly separated. Therefore, these categories do not function independently but are coherently interwoven.

Cooperation in the context of cultural and arts education in rural areas is closely linked to—above all personal—social networks within each regional community, according to the data. Additionally, informal cooperation based on trust appears to consist of only a short- to mid-term period in the regions studied. As described above, social relationships and thus potential cooperation can be promoted through participation in cultural events. Finally, cultural events create a space for encounters and consequently direct interactions with potential cooperation partners and thereby also for the extension of social networks: "Or you go to his events in the concert hall when he presents a book or reads something....And then you talk to him about it and ask him, do you have time for a meeting" (volunteer in a hiking club). As indicated here, not only an event but also a place for social interaction is needed, which in this case is the concert hall. This suggests that a connection is made between cultural participation and cultural places. Such places are furthermore maintained through existing experiences and personal attachment to these cultural places. Through the specific experiences in particular places, common awareness and interest in securing places develop, according to the interviewees. Thus, local actors from different institutions share a common goal, which also directly influences their willingness to cooperate and their social relationships. This is exemplified by the following quotation:

But it was also about the preservation of monuments, i.e., historical buildings, but also churches or prayer houses, which are to be preserved. And that's where he's also involved, the [museum employee]. And in that respect, we also have things in common. (volunteer in a cultural foundation)

In the interviews, several respondents suggest that they feel connected to their region and at the same time have concerns and worries about regional development. These are partly fuelled by perceptions of a decline in services of general interest, as well as environmental and historical baseline conditions. The material shows that the associated existential fears lead to cooperation within the community. As an effect, a social network develops, in which cultural-historical places are instrumentalised as a possible strategy for regional promotion:

And then we considered with a few neighbouring municipalities, with really across [the region], how can we define this, where are our points? And then we concluded that we said that important points for us are A, that we see ourselves as places, that we develop and promote an exchange within the places, [and] B, that we have certain [cultural places]. (mayor)

The expression “we see ourselves as places” shows that residents feel connected to the physical environment and living space. An existing sense of place seems to be an important influencing factor for the formation of a cooperation network that extends beyond the respective village community. This also requires a relevant phenomenon or event which simultaneously functions as a common theme and could cause a potentially negative change in the respective lifeworld of the local actors. To counteract this dynamic, an attempt is made to hold on to regionally specific objects, such as cultural places in the above example, and instrumentalise them at the same time. Here, a connection between sense of region and sense of cultural places becomes apparent. Finally, cultural places can be declared a unique selling point of a region and therefore also as a brand of a municipality: “I just know that [small town] has always been proud of the fact that they have a music school in town and that it is always well supported” (head of a music school). This offers the advantage that cooperation, especially between municipalities and cultural institutions, is created and possibly maintained in the long term.

Furthermore, the data also show a connection between the subcategories of regional attachment and perception as well as regional-specific, cultural programmes. According to the interviewees, cultural offerings and cooperation mainly emerged to promote and preserve the region-specific culture, which is illustrated in the following example:

And to promote that this [regionally specific language] continues to be cultivated and kept alive, the district started, for example, years ago to organise a so-called [name of the event], i.e., a [language-specific day] once a year. (staff member in a cultural department)

This idea arose from a deficit perception, namely the diminishing use of the regionally specific language. To preserve this aspect of regional culture, cooperation with different cultural associations is established:

This is such an [event], where different [groups] perform on stage, who do theatre, who make music, who sing, who dance, who perform sketches, and other things. And for this, we cooperate with all the [regionally specific] groups that exist, for example. (staff member in a cultural department)

Consequently, it can be interpreted that due to the perception of a potential threat of negative regional develop-

ment, cultural events are organised to communicate this threat. However, this requires social support, which offers an occasion for cooperation and networking. In addition, by organising a region-specific, cultural event, a cultural place is created whereby new social contacts can potentially be established and thus the social network can be extended. This expansion is important to also develop potential new cooperation within the network.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The question of our study was: How does local people’s sense of place influence cooperation and social networks in cultural and arts education in rural areas in Germany? Addressing this question is important to eventually develop the first indications for the extension of cooperation and social networks in the cultural sector, which are regarded as an important indicator for the establishment of cultural and arts education programmes and volunteering in rural areas. In summary, “cultural places” and “regional attachment and perception” play a central role in the formation of cooperation and social networks in the field of cultural and arts education in rural areas. Our analyses suggest that local actors develop ties with specific places and, because of these existing connections, tend to participate in region-specific, cultural programmes. Through cultural participation, cultural actors establish new social contacts. In this way, new cooperation can potentially emerge, and thus social networks can be expanded.

Our findings support Mihaylov et al. (2020, p. 173), who argue that a sense of place can be instrumentalised as a motivator for creating social relations in new, dynamic processes of change that might be perceived as a threat (e.g., natural disasters). In this study, we were able to show that in cultural and arts education, existing ties to the physical environment evoke a desire to make an important contribution to the promotion of the region. Due to sense of place, individuals and groups in rural areas develop new cultural and arts education programmes that often refer to regional characteristics. Initial networking and cooperation structures emerge while conceptualising these offers. During the realisation of cultural events, cultural places that function as breeding grounds for social networks are created, as Svendsen and Svendsen (2016, pp. 58–59) had already indicated. In this way, further opportunities for strengthening and building social networks can be opened up. Within these networks, cooperation can potentially occur (Payer, 2008, p. 12) to support cultural programmes. While participating in cultural and arts education, participants find themselves in a space to work on regionally specific issues, which can reinforce a sense of place. Consequently, an iterative process commences, which is why we consider sense of place an important resource for promoting social networks, cooperation, and cultural participation. Otherwise, the literature suggests that too strong a sense of place can

have negative effects, especially in smaller communities. It can, for example, lead to people with a strong sense of place being sceptical of innovative transformation processes and having difficulties being open to new, unfamiliar residents (Dale et al., 2008, p. 267), which can prevent the emergence of new cooperation and thus also the expansion of social networks.

Quantitative surveys of sociocentric networks could verify these results. Since the study was conducted with a qualitative research approach, the results can be generalised only to a limited extent. Furthermore, many characteristics of the actors and places involved in the networks could not be included, so only a fraction of these connections between places and networking could be shown. For example, we assume that the duration of residence also plays an important role. Overall, however, the qualitative analyses for this study provided valuable first insights into the importance of sense of place concerning social networks and cooperation in the field of cultural and arts education in rural areas.

Acknowledgments

The study was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research under the research project Passungsverhältnisse Kultureller Bildungsnetzwerke und Kultur(en) in ländlichen Räumen im Kontext sozialer Teilhabe (in English: The Fitting of Cultural Education Networks and Culture(s) in Rural Areas in the Context of Social Participation; research grant number 01JKL1915B). We acknowledge support from the Open Access Publication Fund of the Freie Universität Berlin. We also thank our colleagues for their helpful comments and reflections on our work.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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