

Farm couple breakup and rural local support

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The main focus of this paper is on how farmers in Norway use their local social networks for help and support in situations of relationship breakup. The breakup of a farm family can be a stressful process that may generate a need for emotional and practical support. On the one hand, small rural communities are often positively characterized as consisting of close relationships between people. On the other, such relationships have the potential to become intrusive. Based on interviews with seven women and four men who have experienced family breakup, this paper reports on the kind of support these individuals received from family, friends, neighbors and the farming community during the dissolution process. The findings indicate that those going through the breakdown of a relationship on the farm interpret it as a personal problem. Thus it can be described as a lonely process where the partners struggle alone with both practical and emotional issues. Both women and men avoid discussing problems with others, except very close and intimate friends, in order to protect themselves against gossip and rumors.

Introduction

In this paper we are interested in how farm couples experience separation and how they make use of their local social networks in handling the relationship breakup. As with any divorce or breakup, separation of a couple on a family farm is a complex process with potentially disastrous consequences, not only to individuals and families, but also to the economic viability of family farms. In Norway, the divorce rate has roughly quadrupled since the beginning of the 1960s (Statistics Norway 2012). While divorce rates in rural areas are only about half the rate of those in urban areas, rates have nevertheless steadily increased over the last 50 years (Vartdal and Blekesaune 1998). Although farmers are less likely to divorce than the population as a whole, their divorce rate is also increasing (Follo and Haugen 2010). Rising rates of divorce and cohabitation breakups are indications of growing family diversity in the countryside (Haugen, Brandth and Follo forthcoming). Relationship breakups among farmers represent a social and cultural change within the farm community as they challenge the family-farm ideology based on heterosexual relations as well as the patriarchal nature of farm succession (Price and Evans 2006). The phenomenon of breakups in farm families has received remarkable little research interest despite the fact that it is an increasing phenomenon that may threaten the survival of farm enterprises for those couples that do divorce or breakup.

While farms, located as they are in rural areas, are understood to have particular community and social characteristics, in contemporary research the rural is not understood as a fixed reality but as a socially constructed and contested concept. The importance of the “rural” lies

in the social, cultural and moral values that have become associated with rural spaces and rural life (Cloke 2006:21). Two contrasting images of the rural can be traced in scientific and popular discourses: one highlighting the positive and idyllic side of rural life, where qualities like safety, peace and quiet, and a caring community are in focus, and the other highlighting the negative and boring side of the rural (Haugen and Villa 2006a). Notions of the rural idyll have been challenged by the experiences of lesbians and gays (Bell and Valentine 1995), young people (Panelli 2002) and women (Little and Austin 1996). Little argues that groups or individuals are “othered” if their identity ‘fails to conform with assumptions and beliefs about the nature of rural society’ (Little 1999:439).

“Safe” and “good” are found to be general representations of rural life (Villa 1999). The conceptions of idyllic and safe are closely linked to the ideas of both transparency and the notion of community familiarity in a small place. Social networks and interactions that inspire trust and reciprocity among citizens is a form of social capital (Putnam 2000). Social capital in rural communities is related to social networks consisting of family, friends, neighbors, colleagues and the farming community. Hence, the countryside has often been associated with the idea of closeness, where belonging and solidarity are present. Important in this view is transparency, in the meaning that “everybody” knows what is going on. However, this characteristic of rural communities has a downside; transparency allows informal social control when norms of conformity are challenged. In Norwegian literature the norm of conformity – of keeping everybody in their right place - has been termed “the village beast” (see Brandth, Haugen and Kramvig 2013). In their study of young people in the countryside, Haugen and Villa (2006b) found that, when compared to boys, young girls were particularly vulnerable to gossip, rumors and lack of privacy, and in addition, were monitored more closely leading them to take actions that avoided risking their reputations (Haugen and Villa 2006b).

In sociology the term “community” has been associated with a particular form of social organization based on small groups centered on neighborhoods, small villages or localities. With the advent of modernity, and more lately globalization, debate has arisen around the decline of community. In spatially bounded localities, social solidarity among the inhabitants can be a product of economic necessity (Crow and Allan 1994) and a reaction to common hardships. But, contemporary neighborliness is different from the type of solidarity that arose out of the shared hardships of many past communities (p.141). Beck (1997) is one writer whose work has dealt with the detrimental effects of modernity on traditional social arrangements. Similarly, an underlying focus in Sennet’s (1998) work is around the tendency towards the weakening of people’s ties to each other. However, as Crow, Allan and Summers (2002) maintain, empirical research has not supported these ideas.

According to Crow et al. (2002) focusing on the opposition between the presence and absence of community/close ties/neighborhood is a limited perspective. Rather, one should recognize that there are several types of neighboring, and that local neighbors are not ‘either “busybodies” or distance-keeping “nobodies”’ (p.128). Like all dichotomies, these two neglect both a large area of middle ground and the diversity that exists in relationships among

neighbors. Instead, it is important to understand varieties of neighboring styles, not as characteristics of the local communities, but as actions actively chosen by individuals (Crow et al. 2002).

When asking how farm couples use their social networks in the divorce process, we draw from the literature outlined above. We are interested in the implications of these aspects of the rural for support in relationship breakups in farming. We ask: What is the role of the locality when it comes to the potential for help and support during a relationship breakup on a family farm? What aspects of the rural locality (supportive or oppressive) are activated? Additionally, given that meanings associated with rurality are gendered (Little 2002), we also ask whether farm women and men experience their local village differently and use their social networks in different ways during the breakup process.

Method and data

Research for this paper was conducted during fieldwork undertaken from 2009 to 2011 in a study of relational arrangements in Norwegian farming¹. The main objective of the study was to identify how farm couples organized their relationship and handled issues about marriage and cohabitations agreements. In addition to collecting statistical data and legal documents, we interviewed eleven farm women and men who had experienced a breakup.

Respondents were sampled through a variety of methods including appeals for participants made through the media and use of the professional and personal networks of the project team. Finding divorced farmers to interview was a difficult matter. Thus, there might be an element of self-selection among the men and women who agreed to be interviewed. It might also be that those who wanted to tell us their stories were also those who managed to cope well after the breakup. Moreover, their stories are told in retrospect, and given we did not speak to both parties who experienced the breakup, we have only one side of the story. The fact that ‘accounts are embedded in the cultural and ideological practices that are available in the society’ where people reside (Syltevik 2010:450), means locality is an important element in this analysis of the interactions between the divorcees and their local networks and neighborhoods.

One of the main criteria for selecting farmers who had experienced a relationship breakup was that the separation had occurred at least three years before, the rationale being that the respondents’ retrospective views about their experiences were probably less coloured by emotional distress, anger or worry about their own welfare after this period of time. Moreover, we were interested in the process of establishing a new life, not in the causes of divorce or any on-going conflict. All of the interviews bar one were conducted in person (the

¹ The project, “Love on the farm - a risky business?”, was financed by the Research Council of Norway (no. 190162/I10) and research money from The Agricultural Agreement.

other was conducted by telephone). Each interview lasted between one and a half to two hours. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

In order to maintain the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used. For the purpose of findings presented in this paper, we draw from interviews with seven women and four men who had experienced a relationship breakup (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of the sample

	Age	Duration of Relation (years)	Formerly married (M) or cohabiting (C)	Children	Ownership of farm	Moved from the farm
Astrid	50's	25	M	Yes	His	Yes
Berit	50's	17	C	Yes	Both	Yes
Dagrun	40's	18	M	Yes	His	Yes
Eva	60's	25	M	Yes	Both	No
Frida	40's	16	M	Yes	Hers	No
Inga	30's	6	C	No	Hers	No
Petra	40's	17	M	Yes	His	Yes
Geir	40's	10	M	Yes	His	No
Helge	50's	20	M	Yes	His	No
John	40's	21	M	Yes	His	No
Ola	50's	25	M	Yes	Both	Yes

As we see from the table, five of the women had been married and two cohabiting. Following the breakup, four women left the farm while three continued farming. Given it is more common for women rather than men to leave the farm after a divorce, the women we interviewed constitute a somewhat atypical group. However, this provides an opportunity for us to study what happens to women who stay on as farmers following a family breakup. All of the men had been married, and all but one continued as farmers after the separation. The youngest interviewee was 31 years old and the oldest 62. All respondents except one of the women had children. The duration of the marriage or cohabitation ranged from 6 to 25 years. In all cases, except one, it was the woman who had instigated the breakup.

Help and support in the divorce situation from people in the locality is studied from the perspective of the interviewed divorcees. Validity in this study is enhanced by the fact that participants were drawn from different areas in Norway and thus lived within neighborhoods with differing characteristics in terms of size, agricultural production and economic importance, remoteness and local labour market. Thus it is not characteristics of one single locality that influence the results.

Sources of support

A breakup process involves many challenges: practical, emotional and legal. In this paper we focus on how individuals who have been through a breakup, used their networks in the local village as sources of practical and emotional support. The analysis shows that after the breakup the main challenge for those who stay on the farm is to continue the farm operation. For those who leave the farm the main challenge is to establish a new home in the same local area. The differing challenges facing those who leave versus those who stay implies a need for various types of help.

The farm stayers

Among the respondents, three men and three women stayed on the farm after the breakup and continued farming. For these men and women who stayed farming, different challenges arose. A main challenge for the men who stayed was their ability to continue to carry out the necessary work on the farm. They seemed to be unprepared for the divorce, and they experienced the separation as a shock when they realized the reality of their partner's decision to leave. As a result of the separation, these men lost motivation and spirit and these mental changes resulted in a reduced capacity to take care of the operation of the farm.

John, who had been a full time farmer while his wife was employed in the public sector, had managed the farm alone for more than 20 years when his wife wanted to leave the relationship. Over the years, he had gradually developed the farm into a modern pork farm, but after she left, he lost interest in the farm and experienced growing problems in handling the farm work: 'I didn't give a damn whether the piglets died. Why should I bother?' Without knowing anything about John's private situation, the veterinarian criticized him and told him that 'This will go to hell; you have to pull yourself together! I told you so last time I was here, too'.

In addition to his wife leaving him, John was also hurt that his wife had met a new man. He felt that the whole village knew about this months before he did and was laughing at him behind his back. This resulted in a form of social anxiety. He made serious efforts to avoid meeting other people, and he invented excuses for not going to practice with the brass band he was part of. John also sought to reduce the risk of meeting neighbors by shopping at the local food store only five minutes before its closing. In a small, transparent community, he felt that there was no place for him to go without being seen as the victim of the betrayal. We may say that in John's case, the rural village became part of a problem he had to handle, not his solution. He coped by applying what Crow et al. (2002) have termed 'distancing mechanisms'. Among other things, this involved avoiding the physical spaces where he might meet neighbors.

Another aspect of these distancing mechanisms was the setting of boundaries around topics of conversation: 'This is a very small, transparent place, and you don't talk about everything, no, you don't', one of the other men said. John didn't involve anybody in his problems. He didn't talk about it with his friends, neighbors or other farmers: 'This is not something you talk to

your pals about', he said. Consequently, he didn't receive any practical help and support. Ironically, he had a friend in a similar situation who had committed suicide, of this John said: 'this was why I thought, damn, I have to pull myself together! It was one of the reasons that made me understand the seriousness of it'. Hence, he opened up to his sister about his problems. She was a nurse and insisted he see a doctor who was a friend of their family and lived in a bigger town outside of John's village. After some thinking he decided to see the doctor, and as a result, he was put on sick leave for a number of months. During the period of sick leave he needed someone to help with the farm work, and he hired some young people, but 'at the end of the day I had to do most of the work myself', he says. In other words, he did not find that being put on sick leave was of much help.

John had a son who was interested in taking over the farm in the future, and if this had not been the case, he told us that he would have quit as a livestock farmer during this difficult period and taken another job in the nearby town. However, because of his son's desire to take over the farm, he decided to continue and to invest in the farm.

In another case, Geir was running a large dairy farm in a small community where farming and forestry had been major industries, but where today most of the residents work in the nearby town. Geir was a very hardworking man, and he had expanded his production by buying two additional farms and leasing neighboring land. His wife had never been able to adapt to life on the farm and thus took on sole responsibility for indoor work, never getting involved in work outdoors. Geir experienced significant personal problems following their divorce. He was not able to sleep and couldn't manage the practical work in the barn. At the same time his parents were taken ill, and he also experienced problems in relation to voluntary work in which he was engaged.

During this time, Geir did not have anybody to support him, partly because he didn't tell anyone about his problems. As he explains himself: 'In connection with the divorce I had none [supporters]... It started with me not managing to take care of the animals. I skipped milking sometimes, the cleaning was inadequate, and some of the calves died'. It became so serious that animals had to be forcibly slaughtered. The veterinarian was the first person to notice that Geir had problems, urging him to see a doctor. Geir went to see the doctor, but unfortunately the doctor did not understand how serious the situation was, and she told him to go home and get some sleep. 'She made a mistake, but I am to blame a bit myself, too, because I am not the type of guy who tells a lot about myself and what is wrong. It does not show on my outside.'

As the cases of both Geir and John show, emotional problems connected to family farm divorce easily turn into problems with managing work on the farm. Most of the friends of these men were surprised when they eventually found out that they had severe problems associated with their divorces. Neither of the men asked for help, and thus didn't receive any from friends or the rural neighborhood.

Helge's story is a bit different. He and his former wife were full time farmers and ran a dairy farm in addition to pork production. After being married for 20 years, Helge's wife wanted a divorce. Helge lived in a much smaller community than John and Geir with only a few hundred inhabitants. Traditionally, this quite isolated community had been dependent on the inhabitants' ability to stand together and contribute with voluntary work, according to Helge. He described himself as a very sociable and outgoing person who enjoyed other people's company.

Nevertheless, Helge did not receive practical help from his network of friends and neighbors during the divorce process. Similar to John and Geir, he experienced the divorce process as a very lonely period. However, when it became known that he had he acquired severe, divorce-related depression, his local network chipped in and gave him much needed help with the farm work. He says:

Then the "whole world" wanted to come. And I got a relief worker, and then neighbors and friends arrived - or my pals - they all came to help out. And a couple of farmers, they came and mucked out the cow shed for me, and they harvested and everything. That was really very nice.

This happened after the emotional crisis had led to a farm crisis. For livestock farmers, the emotional crisis may quickly materialize into a severe animal crisis. It seems to be easier to activate help when it is a question of animal welfare. One precondition for giving help is, however, that the need for help is communicated. The stories of these three men indicate that in the case of family breakup, privacy is valued although privacy is slightly contrary to the expectation that local people in rural areas should be friendly and helpful towards each other. Ambiguities of local involvement seem to be present here as "good" neighbors should be supportive, but not intrusive or nosy in any way.

The three women farmers who stayed on the farm and continued farming after their breakup told different stories from the men about their need for help. None of them had stories about feeling depressed and a resultant inability to manage the farm. Two of them produced livestock and had been dependent on their partners' help before the breakup. During the breakup and afterwards, it was not neighbors and friends who helped them with their practical farm work: it continued to be their former partners.

Eva, who was the only woman who did not initiate the family breakup, lived in a very small community with a few other farms but very few inhabitants. She told us that she had always felt like an outsider in the local community because she had moved there as an adult. She characterized herself as free-spoken and talked more bluntly than others living in the village. However, when it came to telling the locals about their breakup, Eva and her husband decided to say nothing at first, in order to protect their children against gossip and rumors. Only when the divorce was settled some years later, did they inform their neighbors about their separation. When they did tell, then they decided to tell "everything", all the details about their difficulties. This was a strategy to avoid speculation among neighbors. Even though Eva

claimed that there had ‘always been gossip about me’, she had been very satisfied living in the community and loved being a farmer. When the divorce was finalized, Eva felt giving up farming was not an option for her; she wanted to continue. As such, as part of the divorce settlement, her former husband promised to help her with the farm work:

We made a simple and fair agreement (...) I just said that ‘I won’t keep anything else but my personal belongings, if you continue to help me so I am able to continue farming’. And he agreed to do that, but only until I reached retirement age.

Inga, a much younger woman than Eva, had taken over her parents’ farm, which was located in a village, more or less surrounded by the homes of non-farmers. Inga also expressed a feeling of “otherness” within the local community for a number of reasons. First, she confronted local social norms, as she was not married but cohabiting: ‘You should be married to be “proper” when you are a farmer’, she said. Second, she had taken over the farm as a young woman: ‘It is a bit untraditional that it is *me* who has taken over the farm’, she said. Being a young woman farmer she had very little to do with other farmers (who were men) and neighbors: ‘It’s no climate for visiting neighbors in this area’, she said. She described herself as a satellite to the village, and therefore she had less contact with other farmers than she believed was the case in areas where agriculture was more common.

At the time of the interview it was more than two years since Inga and her partner had broken up. However, he was still living on the farm assisting her with the farm work, and they had not informed their neighbors that their romantic relationship had come to an end. They had agreed that this transition period should last for three years, and then she would have to make a decision about what to do in order to continue the farm operation. Her former partner argued that they had to re-establish their relationship because of the farm, but according to Inga this was not an option.

The third woman who continued to live and work on the farm, Frida, was a horticulturist and although her former partner had done a lot of farm work when they were a couple, she was able to keep up the farm production herself after he left. Frida did not seem to have needed any practical or emotional support during the breakup process. She suggested: ‘To the degree that I talked with someone else other than my solicitor, it was perhaps my sister’. Nothing in Frida’s story indicated, however, that she talked very much with her sister or that she had needed to talk more than she had done. Frida made no indications that she had received support from her neighbors.

A common finding within these stories of those who stayed on the farm is the fact that family breakup is a silent topic within their communities. Even though they come from different localities, in all cases it is evident that divorce and separation are considered to be private issues and not something that is shared with or even communicated to local people. We have also seen that the need for practical help to keep the farm running is mediated very differently by men and women. We believe this must be understood in terms of masculinity and femininity in rural areas; men are seen as self-sufficient and, in family farming, as the

patriarchal head of a family. Losing the family, as in the case of divorce, means losing meaning in life. While a man is expected to handle farm operations by himself, women are expected to need help. Another explanation to the different experiences of women and men might lie in the fact that it was mostly the women who wanted out of the relationship. Thus, they were probably better prepared emotionally for the situation than the men for whom the breakup seemed to come out of nowhere.

The farm leavers

Except for Ola, whose main occupation was carpentry, all the farm leavers we interviewed were women. Those who left the farms after the breakup experienced different types of difficulties than those who stayed. One of the main questions they needed to solve in the divorce process was how to acquire knowledge of their entitlements and to accomplish a decent settlement. This is a complicated matter on family farms and the spouses often need information and professional help to sort out legal questions and for moral and emotional support.

According to two women who left the farm, Astrid and Petra, the network of formal farmer support organizations in rural Norway such as the farmers union, the farm women's union and the local agricultural office didn't offer any support for those going through a separation who left the farm. Astrid phoned the regional office of the farmer's union, but they replied 'that they could not help me because they represented *him*'. The central office of the farmer's union has a policy of offering half an hour free legal aid to members, and it is commonly the person staying on the farm after the divorce who is the registered member. Since the value of the farm was estimated to be very low in Astrid's case, she felt that she was offered unreasonably little after 25 years of marriage. In order to achieve a decent settlement she found it necessary to use a lawyer. Similarly, Petra, felt that she had little local support, and she even resigned her membership in the county branch of the Society for Rural Women in protest because they had no support to offer her in these matters. While the organization knew that she needed help, they did not show the active solidarity that she had expected: 'I understood that I had to do what had to be done all by myself', she said. This also concerned lack of active engagement from her husband in the settlement process. 'Put simply, he didn't say anything nor did he do anything'. As Petra's ex-husband slowed up their settlement process, her solution became to consult a lawyer.

When it came to legal issues, such as distribution of assets and liabilities, both women consulted bodies outside the locality for help. Local organizations had little to offer in terms of legal and moral backing. This may be for a number of reasons including that the local bodies did not have the relevant knowledge, their local officials were perhaps too close and may have known both the persons involved, or they may have other, less personal, types of relations to them that made it difficult to discuss what they saw as family problems.

According to Petra, and in contrast to more urban areas, her rural village had very conservative norms for what farm families ought to be and particularly what women should

be allowed to do. She didn't feel she had any local support at all during the breakup process, except from her mother and children. Petra felt she was never really been accepted by the villagers and even by her in-laws. She explained that she represented something different when she moved to the farm and into the community, bringing with her a lot of self-confidence, agricultural education, long blond hair and red painted fingernails. She had a very outgoing personality and according to Petra, she talked too much in comparison to what others in the village were used to. Reflecting on the difference between herself and her husband when it came to local support in the breakup process, she says that 'it is he who owns the farm who gets the greatest support. When I moved from the farm, it was like I had never lived in the community, right. (...) There is no sister solidarity in this place'. However, she spoke about being backed by some local farm women whom she described as 'different' because they were 'resourceful, independent and owned their own properties'. She interpreted the lack of general support as a result of local women's inferior position on the farms, and attributed this to them not having shared or sole ownership of the farm property. However, despite Petra receiving little support from other women in the community, according to Petra, her situation caused some panic among other women in the village, who started thinking about their own situations and rights in the case of divorce.

The respondents were asked if they knew of other divorces among farmers in the locality. The divorce stories that they told us, were stories that indicated that divorces could function as models for good and ill. Dagrún, for instance, told of having received many telephone calls from other women going through relationship breakups who asked for her advice. Another example was the story about a woman who had decided to leave her husband, and thus the farm, with nothing from the property. Petra found this to be a terrible story, but Petra's husband, who was reluctant to share anything from the farm with Petra, referred to it as an example for them to follow.

For those who left the farm, the outcome of the settlement between the couple was reported to be important for individuals' opportunities to establish a new home. Some of them struggled hard to be able to buy their own homes. For example, Petra had been searching for a house since she became aware that the relationship with her husband had to end. She wanted to continue to live in the locality, but there were few housing options available in the area, and she had no money because it took a long time before the divorce settlement was complete. She confided in the local bank, and she praised the help she received from them: 'They knew me and the situation I was in, and I think I had their sympathy', she said.

In another case, Astrid had a friend who helped her find a place to rent after the divorce, and some other (non-local) friends and her former husband helped her redecorate and furnish the apartment she had moved to. Although her friends and some of her husband's family supported her decision to move, she felt that following the separation her mother in law and some of the neighbors avoided her. She says: 'I believe it is because of the strong norm stating that when you are married on a farm, you should stay there. One takes the farm into consideration first of all, and there one should stay!' She believed that many were shocked when they learned about the divorce 'because I had never told anyone how it was between

us'. Her reluctance to communicate her situation to the rest of the community was manifested in the interview setting: even if full anonymity was promised to her beforehand, when Astrid spoke about her divorce she wanted to make sure that some of the details she told us 'must not be printed, then the whole rural community will know who it is'.

Although Berit and her former partner had purchased the farm together, when separating, they decided that it was she who should leave the farm, since he was a full time farmer and Berit was not. After some years Berit ended up buying a small holding 500 meters from the original farm. Berit believed that people in the community saw her as something of a curiosity because, she said:

...I mingle in a men's world. I have opinions about farming and forestry, and I am seen as a threat among women because I am not engaged in curtains and such traditional female interests, and then they are afraid that I will steal their husbands. I do not understand this.

She didn't receive much support when she divorced: 'I was seen as the cause and the "bad guy" in this. So I wasn't very popular'. The farming community, she continues,

... only sees the value of the farm and put farming first, and that's in a sense important, but the women who find a new man, they can stew in their own juice if they don't stay at home...It is a conservative matter. And the men within agriculture are the most conservative you can find.

It is interesting that so many of the women we interviewed, both stayers and leavers, described themselves in terms of "otherness". They seemed to feel ostracized from the community, that they were "strangers", and explained this as a result of having challenged the traditional norms. This was felt as an extra strain in the breakup situation.

While Petra challenged local norms, Dagrún kept a much lower profile. Dagrún was, she said herself, very selective regarding who she talked to about her difficult marriage and the divorce. Her choice of person to confide in was a friend living close by. This friend, educated as a psychiatric nurse, had been 'strong as a rock', as Dagrún described her, when she had needed her support the most. The details of the story about her divorce were unknown to the community. From earlier experiences she knew that stories about what was going on at a large farm like theirs were interesting to other people living in the small village. Dagrún was of the opinion that to tell too much to local people might supply the basis for 'keeping cheap talk going for 20 years or so'. She did not want to risk this happening and consequently she worked hard to keep the majority of details about the divorce inside the family.

Neither Petra, Astrid nor Dagrún turned to people in the neighborhood for help or support. This was not because neighbors would not be friendly or concerned, but because there seemed to exist a delicate balance between privacy and concern. The divorced protected the boundaries of their privacy by means of distancing mechanisms, and at the same time were

influenced by their feelings that the neighbors did not want to be obtrusive or imposing. Moreover, both partners often continued to live locally after the breakup, and people in the village, who had been used to relate to them as a couple, might find it difficult to act towards the former couple as singles. They might also find it difficult to actively support one and not the other, as they might want to stay neutral and maintain a good relationship with both parties. This is particularly demanding in a family breakup situation as the social statuses cross many arenas in small, rural villages.

Discussion – divorcing alone

When it comes to handling the process of relationship breakup, we assumed that rural social networks would be easily activated to provide help and support. Our assumption was grounded in the construction of rural societies as small, caring communities. However, the findings from the interviews conducted as part of this research suggest that information about such breakups was often withheld from the local community in which individuals lived and that in many cases, people going through relationship breakups did not seek out help. Men and women alike were afraid of gossip. They wanted to protect not only themselves, but also their children and former spouses from rumors and talk. Thus, foremost among findings from this research was that the breakup process was something farmers went through alone.

At first sight it may seem as if there were no active, close, supportive local networks that could be relied upon. However looking more closely, it might be the opposite: that the density of the networks kept the divorcees from seeking support within them. In other words, a dense network did not automatically mean help and support from people in the local area, because of central concern for many farmers going through a breakup, was protecting themselves from gossip. In this way, local networks became an additional problem and implied a need to activate distancing mechanisms, for example through individuals setting boundaries for the topics of conversation when they met others.

This distancing indicated that relationship breakups in farming communities were interpreted as personal problems and failures rather than as “normal” problems to be shared with others. This again explains why it is difficult to seek and receive help and support during relationship breakups in rural and agricultural communities. Evidently, the rural communities did not get involved in emotional and personal problems, which seemed to be reserved for close friends. We have seen that rural neighbors did not involve themselves in the farmers’ breakup process before it had become a problem for the farm and the wellbeing of the animals, or an economic problem. When the established farm operations were threatened by crises, the local networks were activated. The local neighborhood mobilizes for the farm crisis, not for the emotional crisis.

In the analysis we have seen a distinct difference between men and women. Men were less likely than women to let people into their breakup process and their emotional state of being. We wondered whether this meant that they did not allow themselves to show signs of weakness, and that this was one reason why their crises escalated and became quite severe before they sought help. Women, on the other hand needed other types of help and were more

resentful at not being offered local support. Many defined themselves as outsiders and interpreted their divorce as a break with the agricultural community and a threat to the norms and existing state of things. They showed not only that a breakup is possible, but also how it can be done. Breaking with something could be interpreted as a broader transformative process that challenged the established state of life, which resulted in less support for women.

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