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The ‘green green grass of home’? Return migration to rural Ireland

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Abstract
There have been calls recently to challenge some of the orthodoxies of counterurbanisation. This paper contributes to this by highlighting the complexity of rural in-migration processes, through a focus on rural return migration. There has been a significant increase in return migration to the Republic of Ireland since 1996. The paper is based on the life narratives of some of the 1980s generation of emigrants who have recently returned to live in Ireland. It focuses on those Irish return migrants who spent a substantial part of their lives in the large urban centres of Britain and the US, and are currently living in rural Ireland. Their narratives of return are explored in terms of discourses of rurality, in particular through notions of a rural idyll and belonging/not belonging. It is argued that return migrants draw on classic counterurbanisation discourses in their narratives of return, but that these are interwoven with notions of family/kinship. Furthermore, the idyllisation of rural life is complicated by aspects of the specificity of the position of the return migrant. It is suggested that rural return migrants are positioned somewhere between locals and incomers, reflecting the complexity of Irish rural repopulation processes, and that the phenomenon of rural return complicates accepted understandings of counterurbanisation.

Key words: return migration, rural repopulation, counterurbanisation, Ireland, narratives

Introduction

The counterurbanisation phenomenon has received much attention in recent decades, as there has been a gradual shift in many parts of Europe away from the dominance of the rural-urban migration flows of the past. The classic counterurbanisation story is one of a mainly middle-class migration driven by constructions of a rural idyll and by lifestyle preferences, and often contributing to local tensions between in-migrants and non-migrants, although there have been calls recently to move beyond these 'orthodoxies of counterurbanisation' (Halfacree, 2001). It is suggested here that in rural regions with a history of outmigration, such as Ireland, urban-rural migration also involves an element of return migration, which complicates the classic local-incomer dualism. Traditionally, counterurbanisation and rural return migration have tended to be treated separately, but it is useful to view them as overlapping rather than distinct phenomena.

This paper aims to contribute to this dialogue by exploring narratives of recent rural return migration in Ireland, focusing on the international return migration flow, and drawing on insights from both counterurbanisation and return migration literature. It is based on life narrative interviews with individuals who emigrated from Ireland in the 1980s, lived in large urban centres in Britain and the US, and have returned from the 1990s onward to live in rural Ireland. Return migration for them, on the one hand, represents the fulfillment of the classic emigrant dream of returning home. However, simultaneously, it involves migration to a place that may be in many ways strange to them. Therefore it could be argued that they are positioned somewhere between local and incomer. The paper explores these migrants' narratives of return in terms of discourses of rurality, in particular through notions of a rural idyll and belonging/not belonging. The extent to which their narratives of rural return cohere with common discourses of counterurbanisation is assessed. In this way, the paper aims to contribute to understandings of the dynamics and experiences of rural return migration, while also drawing attention to the complexity of rural repopulation processes.

Patterns of rural return migration

The 1980s was a decade of extremely high unemployment and high emigration in the Republic of Ireland. Simultaneously, there was considerable demand for labour in Britain, especially in London. Annual rates of emigration increased throughout the decade, peaking in 1989 when over 70,000 left the country (Courtney, 2000). This was followed by unprecedented positive net migration during the 1996-2002 period. An economic transformation from the mid-1990s onwards, together with a number of other factors, has contributed to high immigration and provided the impetus for many of the previous generations of emigrants to return to live in Ireland. Employment in the state increased from 1.1 million in 1988 to 1.9 million in 2005 (Central Statistics Office, 2006), while real GDP almost doubled in the decade to 2004 (Economic and Social Research Institute, 2006). Rapid social change has accompanied these economic changes, usually viewed in terms of a growth in consumerism and a general trend of modernisation. Net emigration has been replaced by net immigration for the first time since the 1970s, when return migration was also a significant factor. Annual figures for total gross immigration in the 1990s show that returning Irish dominated immigration flows until 1999 (Central Statistics Office, 2005). Since then numbers arriving each year have remained fairly static while numbers of other immigrants have increased. In all, approximately 221,000 Irish-born migrants returned to the Republic of Ireland between 1996 and 2005.

Some of these data are available by county of current residence. They suggest a dual geographical pattern for returning migrants, settling in either the largest urban centres in Ireland, or in the western and more rural regions of high emigration in the past. For example, data for current residence of Irish-born persons who lived outside the state one year prior to the 2002 Census show that, as a proportion of the population, the highest rates are found in the counties containing the cities of Dublin, Galway, Cork and Limerick, and also on the north-western seaboard (Donegal, Mayo and Sligo). The latter suggests that it is likely that many

return migrants are returning to their counties of origin in the west, as Jones (2003) also argues based on his analysis of the 1996 figures.

Unfortunately more detailed spatial data is unavailable. However, given the low levels of urbanisation in the north-western region[1], these regional patterns imply that there is a rural dimension to the international return migration flows. This could be conceived as a form of international counterurbanisation, as people move from urban centres in Britain, the US and elsewhere to rural parts of Ireland. Definitions of counterurbanisation vary but it is generally accepted that it incorporates 'the residential migration of people from what might loosely be termed 'urban' areas to what might loosely be termed 'rural' areas (Boyle and Halfacree, 1998, vii). There is little detailed research on counterurbanisation in the Republic of Ireland (ROI), due in large part to the predominance of urbanisation and rural decline during much of the 20th century. Some studies in the 1970s and 1980s did recognise a rural repopulation trend, however, involving an element of return migration (Gillmor, 1988; Cawley, 1990). A detailed study by Gillmor (1988) of villages throughout ROI showed significant population increase in these settlements in the 1970s and early 1980s as a result of both natural increase (declining outmigration) and in-migration (mainly short-distance moves and return migration). Stockdale's (1992) findings in Northern Ireland in the 1980s were similar, revealing the importance of short-distance moves and family connections in rural population growth. Some research exists also on the relatively small countercultural migration flows to the west of Ireland from other parts of western Europe, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, which have given rise to an 'indigenous counterculture' population in some pockets on the western seaboard (Kockel, 1991; Hegarty, 1994).

More recently, it is clear that many rural areas in ROI have experienced population growth during the 1991-2002 period. This has occurred mainly in the hinterlands of large urban centres or in rural regions with a significant urban system, while population has continued to fall in the more marginal and less urbanised rural regions (Commins, 2001; Central Statistics Office, 2002). It is clear also that the rural population growth in the hinterlands of large urban centres is being driven largely by the rapid expansion of commuting zones. Drawing on previous patterns (Gillmor, 1988; Cawley, 1990), it is likely that outside these areas, any rural population growth still involves declining rates of outmigration and an increase in return migration from within and outside Ireland.

Despite the historical tendency to consider return migration separately from other types of rural in-migration, return has been recognised recently as an important element of wider rural repopulation processes in some European contexts. Hoggart and Paniagua (2001) highlight the importance of return migration in rural in-migration flows in Spain, suggesting that it is part of a complex set of daily, weekly and seasonal migration flows that bind rural and urban areas together. Similarly, Stockdale *et al*. (2000) argue that rural repopulation in Scotland is part of a wide set of social and economic restructuring processes. They found that 53 per cent of migrants living in rural areas in Scotland had moved there because of a previous connection (through holidays or family) to the area. This suggests that more than half of in-migrants in rural Scotland are not entirely 'new' or unconnected to their destinations, and that the dynamics that emerge as a result go beyond the classic incomer-local dualism often associated with counterurbanisation. It is likely then that in countries which have experienced considerable rural outmigration in the past, such as Scotland, Spain and Ireland, rural repopulation processes involve complex inter-relationships between new in-migration, return migration, return visits by ex-rural dwellers, second homes (some owned by ex-rural dwellers), and importantly, declining out-migration rates. This suggests that the dynamics of counterurbanisation in these contexts are more complex than can be explained by a simple insider-outsider dualism.

Dynamics of rural return

Counterurbanisation has been a well-established and well-researched process in other contexts for some time. A substantial body of research exists on the dynamics of rural repopulation in Britain in particular (for example, the collection of papers in Boyle and

[1] Defined in terms of proportion of population residing in towns of 1500 persons or more (Census 2002)

Halfacree, 1998; Stockdale *et al.*, 2000). Much of this research focuses on the social and cultural conflicts that arise in rural communities as a result of in-migration. Idyllised representations of rural life have been influential in driving the population movement to the countryside. Cloke, Goodwin and Milbourne (1998) have explored the conflicts that occur between 'locals' and 'incomers' in English and Welsh rural localities, highlighting the importance of differential expectations of the nature of rural life in this. The counterurbanisation process in England and Wales has been understood in terms of a middle class colonisation or gentrification of particular rural areas (Cloke, Phillips and Thrift, 1998; Phillips, 2004).

A similar process has been identified by Hegarty (1994) in her study of the local-incomer interface in west Cork, which includes the countercultural immigrant movement as well as the more strictly counterurban migrants. She found that locals and incomers tended to occupy separate worlds, which occasionally came into conflict with one another at the boundaries of their worlds. Apart from research on such countercultural immigrants, the research that exists on rural in-migrants in Ireland more generally suggests that a less polarised set of dynamics occurs. Gillmor (1988) concludes that social divisions between residents and newcomers were not evident as a general problem in Irish villages in the 1970s and 1980s, which is likely to be explained by the short distances involved in the in-migration flows as well as the significant return migration dimension. It is highly likely that this is changing however in certain areas today, given the recent rapid expansion of urban commuter zones in the Irish countryside, as Mahon (this issue) suggests in her research on the urban fringe in the west of Ireland.

Returning rural migrants have not formed a prominent part of counterurbanisation research. Rural in-migrants are generally considered to belong to one of two distinct categories, 'those who have lived in a place before and those who have not' (Hoggart et al., 1995, p 209). Rural return migration exists outside what Halfacree (2001) calls the orthodoxies of counter-urbanisation. He argues that the term 'counterurbanisation' has become purified in a way that ignores that which does not fit the agreed story of counterurbanisation. The agreed story, he argues, is one of a class-based and rural idyll driven migration process, often understood as contributing to a local-incomer dualism in rural localities. Halfacree (2001) in his work focuses on crofters as a particular category that de-stabilises accepted notions of counterurbanisation. It could also be argued that rural return complicates the stability of the social category. There have been calls to move beyond this dualistic understanding of the social dynamics of counterurbanisation. For example, Allan and Mooney (1998) argue that the language of counterurbanisation is based on an assumption that an 'indigenous' rural population can be clearly distinguished from an 'incomer' group. They argue that this assumption is problematic as rural populations are heterogeneous and such categories change according to context and situation. They refer to the work of Phillips (1986), who argues that rural dwellers in the Yorkshire Dales position themselves along a scale ranging from 'local' to 'incomer' with many points in-between. Such perspectives challenge the idea that the dynamics of rural counterurbanisation are dominated by a local-incomer dichotomy.

A significant body of research has focused on the role of rural return migration in European countries which have a history of rural outmigration. Some of this research is strongly influenced by a modernisation perspective and by the debate around the potential of return migration to be a modernising influence, both economically and socially, in marginal rural regions. In Ireland, a number of studies explored return migration to rural areas in the 1970s and 1980s (Brannick, 1977; Gmelch, 1986; McGrath, 1991). Some of these explored the economic and demographic impact of rural return migration. Brannick's (1977) research concluded that the future of her local case-study in the west of Ireland was demographically transformed by the infusion of return migrants and their families. Gmelch (1986) found in her research on return migration to the west of Ireland in the 1970s that the main contribution of migrants was through setting up businesses, although most investment was in the construction of new homes and in the purchase of consumer goods. This is similar to the findings of King et al. (1986) and Reynolds (1993) on return migration in Italy, Lewis and Williams (1985) on Portugal, and Khater (2001) on the Lebanon. For example, Reynolds (1993) found that most of the savings of return migrants to Casalattico in Italy were not being spent on productive activities which would have a significant impact on the local economy.

Many international studies have found that return migrants experience adjustment problems associated with making the transition from an urban industrial society to what is perceived to be a traditional rural society (Gmelch, 1980). Some of the European studies emphasise the social, cultural and lifestyle differences between return migrants and the non-migrant populations. Studies in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s found conflicting results, with McGrath's (1991) research in Achill (west Mayo) concluding that return migrants tended to be more conservative in outlook than non-emigrants, possibly reflecting the selectivity of the emigration flow, while Brannick's (1977) research in Co. Clare found that return migrants had more 'modern' (that is, more liberal) attitudes than non-migrants. More recent research has moved away from the modernisation perspective and has adopted class-based, postcolonial or experiential perspectives. For example, Khater's (2001) research on return migration to rural Lebanon emphasises the class distinctions that emerged between return migrants and non-migrants, highlighted by the conspicuous consumption of returnees, which have contributed to some social tensions. A study of return migration in a rural area in north Cork in Ireland by O'Donnell (2000) has adopted an experiential approach, highlighting the problematic nature of the adjustment processes for one return migrant family.

There is potential therefore for research which explores in depth the dynamics and discourses of these complex rural repopulation processes, but which integrates perspectives from counterurbanisation literature with return migration perspectives. This paper seeks to contribute to this dialogue by exploring narratives of recent rural return migration in Ireland, focusing on the international return migration flow. Drawing on valuable insights from the counterurbanisation literature, the paper explores migrants' narratives of return in terms of discourses of rurality, in particular through notions of a rural idyll and belonging/not belonging. It seeks to understand the extent to which the experiences of rural return are, like those of counterurbanisation, shaped by particular expectations of rural lifestyles, but also by other expectations and memories which are specific to return migration. It is suggested here that rural return migrants occupy both insider and outsider status simultaneously and thereby complicate notions of incomer-local dualisms.

Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a larger all-island collaborative project which involved collecting life narratives of return migrants to Ireland[2]. The paper draws on one part of the project, that is, 33 life narratives collected across 'southern' Ireland (defined for project purposes as Ireland excluding the nine Ulster counties). All of the participants emigrated from Ireland between the late 1970s and early 1990s, and returned to Ireland during the 1990s or 2000s. The participants were drawn from all regions of 'southern' Ireland, and were recruited through Irish emigrant organisations, graduates' associations, personal contacts and an element of snowball sampling. Drawing on existing literature on emigration in the 1980s, this part of the project was concerned in particular with capturing the social class and occupational differences in this migrant group. Taking into consideration the debate regarding the social composition of 1980s emigrants (Mac Laughlin, 1994; Shuttleworth 1997), and the emerging available information on characteristics of recent return migrants (Punch and Finneran, 1999), there was a desire to include some of the main social groups who had emigrated in the 1980s and early 1990s, and who seemed to have been returning in recent years. Some specific target groups were identified as a result. These were construction workers and those working in the caring professions (nursing, social work/care). There was also a specific desire to include those who had emigrated with little or no qualifications or resources. In particular we aimed to include people who had been undocumented migrants in the US, and we also targeted graduates. While these groups were targeted in particular, we also included a broad spectrum of other occupations and attempted to achieve a balance in terms of gender.

The paper focuses on one particular group of return migrants, that is, those who were living in rural areas. It draws on the interviews conducted with the return migrants who were living in a

[2] The collaborative project, Narratives of Migration and Return, involved partners in University College Cork, Centre for Migration Studies (Omagh), Queens University Belfast and University of Limerick. Interviews were conducted by the author, by Dr. Johanne Devlin Trew and by Dr. Liam Coakley.

rural area at the time of the interview (2004-05). There were 14 of these in total. They included two couples where both were return migrants, and ten individuals interviewed on their own. Eight were female and 6 were male. Most (11) were married, one was separated, and all but one had at least one child at the time of the interview. All were aged in their 30s and 40s at the time of the interviews. The periods of time they had spent abroad ranged from three years to 19 years, with the average being eight years. Nine of them had grown up in rural areas. Their current residences were in rural and small town locations across southern Ireland, with half of them being located in one of the western counties with high rates of return (identified by the census analysis above). Four were living in the localities in which they had grown up, another four in the localities in which their spouses had grown up, and a further two in the counties in which they had grown up. They are quite a specific cohort, then, in terms of age, family status and rural background.

My own position as a return migrant of similar age is likely to have influenced the course of the research, in that it may have been influential in shaping the direction taken in the interviews, sensitizing me to particular issues, while simultaneously closing me off to others. However, usually I did not mention my migration history until the end of the interview, partly to avoid the pitfall of attempting to over-identify with participants in an effort to avoid difference, as I was aware of the very heterogeneous nature of the return migrant population. The life narrative interviews were usually conducted in participants' homes, using a semi-structured interview format, and they generally lasted between about 75 and 120 minutes. They focused on childhood and growing up, emigration experiences and return experiences. The research was informed by biographical approaches to migration (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Ní Laoire, 2000) and sought to reveal the many unacknowledged factors which may influence a migration decision or experience. Therefore the interviews aimed to allow participants to talk 'around' their migration experiences as well directly about them. This allowed any thoughts and feelings relating to rural and urban life to emerge in the course of the interviews, without asking directly about them. The life narrative method was useful in terms of analysis of the material, with reference to the idea that narratives actively construct lives and identities through the act of telling by 'storying' a set of events, memories and thoughts (Lentin, 2000; De Tona, 2004). Thus narratives serve to create coherence out of the fragmented nature of diasporic or migrant lives (De Tona, 2004).

The rural idyll and the dream of return

Family

Many of the return migrants, whether returning to rural or urban areas, are very explicit that their reasons for return are related to family ties or family reasons of one kind or another. This is not unusual among return migrants – other researchers have found family to be the key factor in decisions to return, for example in New Zealand (Lidgard and Gilson, 2002), the Carribean (Condon, 2005), and West Africa (Tiemoko, 2003). Return to Ireland is often narrated in terms of a desire to be near to parents, occasionally triggered by death or illness, but sometimes simply to be able to spend more time with them while they are still around. Gray (2003) discusses the complex system of responsibilities that tie family members who stay and those who migrate together. Participants in this research talked about having promised their parents that they would return, and some also talked about wanting to return after the death or illness of a parent. Return migration can be driven by a sense of obligation, even if it is not always articulated as such.

> Interviewer: Why was it you wanted to come home?
> Interviewee: I think… I've always said I wanted to come home, and every time I came back my brothers were actually getting older, things were changing, I was missing that side of it. My parents, I'd look at them [and think] God they're getting older. My granny died, my auntie died, and I thought God no, I think it's time (Noreen[3]).

Some mention a desire to spend more time with younger siblings, having missed out on their growing up, or to see nieces and nephews grow up. In this way, the notion of the extended

[3] Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect participants' anonymity.

family seems to be quite important. There is a desire to be part of a kinship network that is not physically present, or if so, not to the same extent, outside Ireland.

> I really appreciate the fact that we can live here. And we live near [my husband's] mother and father, and the cousins… I mean that's a big thing for kids too, family, at the end of the day we get on with them, kids get on with their cousins, the granny is over there, they're in and out to her […] So it's good for them, they know their cousins, even their aunts… (Kathleen).

Condon's (2005) research on return migration to the Caribbean highlights the desire to access what she calls a 'social field,' a network of family and friends, or at its loosest, a network or community where one is 'known'. This points to the importance of social capital, or the human resources that migrants expect to be able to draw upon and to contribute to on their return. Stockdale (2002) found in her research with rural out-migrants in Scotland that the role of family and other networks becomes important when migrants have their own families or when their parents become elderly, at which stage return migration is likely to occur, and migrants become less beneficiaries and more benefactors in family networks. In Ireland, this phenomenon is particularly significant as many of the 1980s cohort of emigrants have experienced this particular life-stage at a time when economic transformation has made return migration possible. Reflecting the strong role of obligation and family commitment in narratives of return migration, the migrant is constructed as a provider of support to others in the family network, in particular ageing parents, but also as a beneficiary of these networks:

> And then I discovered that here I was in my early to mid-twenties, starting to get homesick and I was completely taken by surprise by that. And having my own flat then I discovered things like, I was on the bottom floor, and the flat above me flooded, so their flat ruined my bathroom, […] and I was like, who will I get to fix this? Who do I know? How much does it cost? Who can help me? Whereas here if you have a problem, you know that Jimmy down the road, or Mary's brother, or me father's friend, or even Dad or somebody, would be able to help you out, would be able to fix it (Sarah[4]).

As expressed here by Sarah, rural Ireland is constructed in terms which emphasise the values of community and family. Although narrated through the story of her flooded bathroom, she talks about reaching a life-stage when it became very important to her to be part of a strong social field, which she characterises in terms of family connections and which is located in the place in which she grew up. Her journey back to Ireland is represented as a journey home and a return to safety, security, family, even as a kind of retreat.

> But it seemed to be like too many people that I knew were screwed up because of their parents, or… their marriage, or abuse, or whatever it was, and I was like, no actually there's not enough healthy-minded people around me – I need to get back to normal life. […]. It was a relief - to my system to come home to Ireland. I think by the time I came home, I was burnt out. Burnt out and drained, and too aware of, of, the difficult things in life (Sarah).

It may be that this is more than a desire to go home and to be near to family, but a broader desire to be part of what is perceived to be a society based on community and kinship. Corcoran (2002) conceptualises this as a 'quest for anchorage.' This reflects global mythic constructions of Ireland as some kind of pre-modern (rural) 'other' to the modern world – a place where the ills of modernity can be healed. This is of course a myth, but for the migrant, who is positioned between both places, it is a way of making sense of their own movement between both places. Keohane and Kuhling (2004) suggest that far from being devalued in Ireland, traditional values of communal and kinship solidarity are in fact being shored up through modern (and more extravagant) expressions of solidarity, sociability and reciprocity – citing extravagance of gift exchanges at Christmas and weddings, and inflated house prices for example. They suggest that the traditional and the modern collide with one another in the practices of consumerism in contemporary Ireland. The return migrant could be seen as part

[4] Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect participants' anonymity.

of this 'collision culture' (Keohane and Kuhling, 2004) and reflects it in the narrative of return for family or community.

Rural idyll

The dream of return is a classic theme of Irish emigrant discourse. It has a mythic quality in diasporic culture, from the classic exile ballads to films like John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952), which suggest that the ultimate aim of the emigrant is to return to Ireland and some kind of alternative to the modern urban immigrant lifestyle. Representations of Ireland as a haven from modernity recur in the literature of Irish exile, being associated with family, community and often, rurality (Duffy 1995). In opposition to this, the other (usually England or the US) is represented as a place of danger, immorality and anomie. Although it has its roots in what Duffy (1995) terms the 'thatched cottage' nostalgia of the 1940s and 1950s, this classic dualistic motif persists today, and is adapted and re-worked by return migrants as they make sense of their own biographies. Contemporary narratives of return draw on historically very powerful, often essentialised, discourses of place, migration and identity. The narrative of return to a safe haven is based on highly polarised constructions of home and away. It is one narrative among many that are used by return migrants. This does not imply that return migrants necessarily have idealised and essentialised notions of Ireland, but that they can use this narrative as an explanatory tool to make sense of their emigration and return experiences.

An idyllised construction of Ireland itself is evident in the narratives of some of the return migrants who took part in the research. This involves notions of safety, community, family and quality of life. However, this construct of Ireland also has a strong rural connotation. Mirroring aspects of the counterurban impulse, some of the interviewed return migrants express an active desire to live in the countryside, referring to a slow pace of life, safety, a good place to bring up children, and in general a better quality of life than is possible in an urban area.

> So. I definitely wouldn't go back to a city, […] - no you should be chilling out and relaxed, not so stressed out. […] No, I'd never go back to a city (Sarah).

> I *love* the country. I love the quietness of it *now*. At first it intimidated me a little bit you know, it was so quiet. I don't know, maybe I've gone full circle. But now I appreciate you know. It's a *lot* less stressful than living in New York. But saying that, we lived in a neighbourhood, it was busy [….] Now I absolutely love it, I wouldn't live in a town (Kathleen).

However in general, and in contrast to the counterurban impulse, they do not necessarily claim that they returned in order to live in the countryside. Their primary reasons for returning do not usually include a stated desire for rural living, but instead to be closer to family, and/or for a particular lifestyle, but this is often constructed in terms of community and rurality. While a conscious desire to live in the countryside is not presented as an explanation for their return migration, they do narrate their returns home through discourses of the rural idyll, drawing on traditional polarised constructions of Ireland as rural, communal, safe and pre-modern, in opposition to an urban modernity that is experienced elsewhere.

Children

The return migrants then are actively involved in reproducing classic counterurbanisation discourses of rural life. This also incorporates notions of the heterosexual nuclear family and of rearing children in the countryside (Valentine, 1997). Ireland is commonly constructed by them as a good place to bring up children, characterised by a sense of freedom and space, safety, and the support of an extended family network. This applies to migrants returning to both urban and rural contexts, but has a particular resonance in relation to rural return, as it is associated with the idea of a safe and healthy environment in which to raise children. It is frequently used by returnees to justify the decision to return.

> We've two kids now and they can go out the front door and see a cow in the field and go down and talk to a cow at the gate or they can bring the dog for a walk in the lane and there's no traffic and there's birds' nests and there's everything you know. So the kids love it, we love it. So we really feel like we did the right thing (Barry).

While the prominence of this narrative of rural Ireland as a good place in which to bring up children certainly reflects the very specific age and family profile of participants this study, it also draws upon wider discourses of rurality and childhood, for example what Jones (1997) calls 'country childhood idylls'. He argues that country childhoods tend to be seen in terms of innocence, freedom and contact with nature. He suggests that the idealisation of country childhood is both constructed and represented by adults in a kind of nostalgic remembrance of their own childhoods. Many of the return migrants in this research talked about their own country childhoods in romanticised ways. They may in fact have highly idyllised views of country childhood based on their own selective memories of growing up in a very different countryside to that of today:

> It was a farm, so..! We didn't get television till I was about ten, so before that we just played outside a lot, and did all the farm work – there was turf and there was hay to be cut in summertime and the animals to be fed and that. So basically we led a very happy family life. We used to get bored because we were miles from any other kids, you know just farming… but you know we had a nice quiet life growing up really.
>
> [And later in the same interview:]
> We both grew up on farms and I suppose we wanted the children to have the same (Kate).

However, as is evident in these excerpts from Kate's interview, return migrants also remember why they left in the first place. Kate remembers the boredom of growing up in the countryside, but chooses to represent it now as a 'nice quiet life'. The return experience is sometimes a sharp reminder of the feelings of isolation and claustrophobia that migrants may have rejected in their youth. They can have negative memories of places they left behind, which they reflect upon in the course of the interview.

> Well I never was a homebody. […] maybe I felt that this, living in a country village, close to a country village, maybe was a little bit small. I didn't like the fact that everybody knew each other's business (Sarah).

Interestingly, Sarah realised that what she now values in a rural community is what she was originally escaping from.

> We both enjoy [laughs] the *community* that's here! The community that I wanted to get away from when I was 18, 19, 20 is the one that we're most comfortable in. […] We both like it and we're only a mile outside and you have your shop and your pub that you feel comfortable going to, my work is half an hour away, and so we wouldn't move anywhere else. We wouldn't even move out of this locality (Sarah).

So the social structures that were claustrophobic to Sarah in her teens became a sense of community in her thirties, reflecting the ways in which values change over the life course. In fact, return migrant narratives shift between a nostalgic romanticisation of rurality and a frustration with rural life, not just over the life-course, but in the course of one conversation, as they seek to make sense of their migrations.

A number of return migrants, as they reflected on this idea of rural Ireland as a mecca for bringing up children, were aware that Ireland might not actually live up to this, with its lack of play areas, lack of facilities and its youth drinking culture. This reflects the contradictions inherent in the idyllisation of rural childhood (Valentine, 1997). As Bushin (2004) has found in her research, it is often very easy to use children's needs as a way of explaining migration decisions, regardless of the significance of other reasons. For example, Michelle said that when she and her husband were rationalising their decision to move back from London to Cork, after about ten years, one of the reasons 'for' the move was that they would have easier access to the countryside and the sea for their children. In fact she says that they rarely take advantage of that now that they are back. A closer look at their explanations for the decision to move back reveals that they are talking not so much about the possibility of a better life for

their children in Ireland, but of a better lifestyle for families or parents in Ireland than the immigrant lifestyle they were leading in London.

> I think the time when most people do it [return to Ireland] is actually when they have children first. I think when you're single or when you're married first and you've no children, I think it's a great life, but when you have children and you don't have family there to support you and it's not so easy to get babysitters, I think a lot of our friends moved back at that stage (Michelle).

Although return migrants may be motivated by broader factors such as family lifestyles, social capital and family obligations, this can be communicated through the idea of a country childhood idyll, a very powerful discourse shaping migration decisions and narratives.

Return visits

Return migrants are also in the position that their constructions of rural life have been shaped in part by their experiences of regular visits back to rural Ireland during their time away. Returning at least twice a year was common for the migrants in Britain, while visits were less frequent, but no less symbolic, for those in the US and elsewhere. The August and Christmas holiday periods in many rural areas in Ireland, particularly in the 1980s, were characterised by an influx of returning migrants, who contributed to increased activity and dynamism in these areas for a short time. Similarly, in rural Spain, villages are regularly transformed by the seasonal influx of returning migrants (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001). Gray's (2003) research highlights the ways in which Irish migrants on return visits disrupt accepted notions of relationships between place and identity. Frequent return visits raise uncomfortable questions around 'who belongs' as the boundaries between home and away and between migrant and non-migrant become blurred.

The return migrants in this research describe their visits home in terms of the excitement of the build-up to each visit, the hectic social whirl of engagements, which over the years is replaced by more ambivalent feelings towards the visit. Then they speak of frustration with the feelings of obligation that bring them 'home' every year and the endless rounds of visiting relatives, of living out of suitcases even though one is ostensibly 'at home'. The tensions between being on holiday and being at home begin to show.

> Going home for the holiday, oh it was great, but when I had the kids I found it very stressful because you were travelling all around to see everybody so it wasn't like a holiday, you'd go back drained […] But it was lovely going home but I'd know when my holiday would be up I'd be very sad leaving my mum, […] and it would take me a week or two to settle, but then I'd be happy then again, because it was our home (Kate).

To an extent, then, return visits make migrants aware of the realities of life in rural Ireland, and of their own ambiguous position within it, and gives them an opportunity to reflect on this.

> There's comfort in coming home, but then you're thinking 'I should have gone somewhere else' because you're being told what to do (Marie).

Marie's narrative of return in this short excerpt reflects the movement back and forth between an idyllisation of, and frustration with, rural life. On the one hand, she remembers with nostalgia the comfort and joy of going home to rural Ireland on holidays, and reproduces the discourse of home as a safe haven, but on the other hand, she is also reminded of the discomfort of the loss of independence associated with being 'at home', even for a short visit. There is a constant tension present in her narrative between the desire for autonomy and the desire for belonging, which reflects her relationship with the place she calls home. The relationship between the migrant and the place of return is a complex one, reflecting the intensity of the dream of return as well as the ties of obligation and responsibility between the return migrant and 'home'.

Culture shock of return

The idea of 'culture shock' is a common one in many immigration contexts, whether urban or rural. It can also be associated with return migration. While the discourse of the dream return is very evident in the imagined geographies of home, there is disappointment when the experience of return does not live up to this. For the return migrant, the move from, typically, an urban area in Britain or the US to a rural area in Ireland, can involve considerable culture shock, as found by McGrath (1991) in the 1980s. Research on return migration in other contexts, such as the Caribbean, highlights the adjustment issues for women in particular who experience some loss of gendered autonomy on return (Phillips and Potter, 2005). The adjustment issues associated with return migration can be exacerbated by the additional shock of an urban to rural migration.

Loneliness

For some rural return migrants in this study, especially for women who might be working in the home a lot, loneliness is a big issue. This quote from Kathleen reflects something of the gendered nature of the return experience.

> I guess I was lonely too. You were living in the country after living in a city. I found it very lonely. I remember my husband used to look out the window and he'd say 'look at the lovely view,' and I used to think 'God! I'm going crazy here!' I mean what good is a view? It wasn't as easy to make friends. When I was in New York I used to just walk up the street to the shop and I'd meet x amount of people. I used to talk to people. I just found it very quiet and a bit lonely you know (Kathleen).

For some, this is bound up with the changes brought about by the recent economic transformation in the Republic of Ireland, which is a very common theme. Corcoran (2002) found in her research that return migrants considered the fast pace of life in Ireland, high property prices and increased congestion to be unexpected and clashed with their dreams of return. Ireland's economic boom made it possible for them to return but also meant that Ireland was taking on the characteristics they had tried to leave behind them in their destinations. The disappointment with the growing individualism and materialism of Irish society is a constant theme in all of the interviews, but is exacerbated among rural returnees because it clashes sharply with the imagined rural life.

> And that friendliness, going out and meeting neighbours, that's gone. I mean I go out on my bike and I'd stop and chat you know. No, it's just the wave in the car. Even meeting people in town now, it's just 'hello', no such thing as standing for a minute.
>
> Everybody's so busy, it's all so fast, they have to get on, but what's two minutes? […] In general it's got very busy here, it's rushing, everybody rushing, I don't know, I know we're all busy, but… there's no lingering. […] Just getting very fast here. (Kate).

However, in the same interview, Kate bemoans the slow pace of life and lack of consumer culture in Ireland, reflecting the contradictions of the rural idyll and the emigrant dream of return.

> Little things used to get to me […] Everything is such a slower pace here […] It's just this attitude - maybe it's just in the country - it's not consumer-friendly. Maybe it's different in cities (Kate).

This apparent contradiction may be related to her own loss of a sense of community on her return. Because the narrative of Ireland as community is very strong, the absence of an immediate community can be particularly difficult for the return migrant. Many migrants are part of strong social networks while abroad, whether they are within predominantly Irish communities or with other friends or colleagues. These networks provide an important support structure and a sense of belonging while away from 'home'. For some, there can be something of an identity crisis associated with the transition from being part of ethnic communities or friendship networks in large cosmopolitan centres to the homogeneity of Irish society.

> In some ways, it's funny, but you nearly felt over [London] like you nearly belonged to something more strongly than you did here because even though, you *were* Irish - when you were over, the Irish community, because you were different you all belonged together if you know what I mean, whereas here everyone's all the same anyway so it's not that strong the kind of feeling of belonging. So I think we definitely missed that when we came back here you know (Michelle).

Some of the returnees spoke of the difficulties in establishing new friendships back in Ireland, partly because of the difficulties in breaking into established networks. This relates to the life-stages of these return migrants, who very often have missed out on the vital friendship-forming life-stage in Ireland. Reflecting further on this, Michelle comments:

> I think if you're from an area - it's great if you're from an area, that you know everybody, but in Ireland I think if you move in, it's not as easy maybe to fit in because people know each other for years and they have their own circle. And while I'm not saying they weren't friendly, they were very friendly, but you know you'd stand and say hello or whatever but it doesn't go beyond that, the next step sort of. That's what I found at the beginning. But gradually I have got to know quite a lot of people and I have made friends but it takes a bit of time (Michelle).

She compares this with London, where she comments that people don't have 'that family background' and as a result there are more events organised for people to get to know each other. This represents the other side of returning to live in a family-oriented society, where social and family networks are closely intertwined, often very exclusive and it can be difficult to 'break in'. This becomes apparent on return, when it can be seen from a different angle, especially for those who return to a rural area which is not where they grew up, perhaps where their spouse grew up, as in the case of Kate:

> I find here people are much quieter, they keep to themselves. I mean it's lovely where I live but at the end of the day, they all do their own thing. They're all in their own little cocoon (Kate).

This is particularly difficult to cope with if it is unexpected, because with return migration, unlike some other forms of rural in-migration, there is an expectation of famili-arity. There is a clash between the reality of unfamiliarity and expectation of familiarity, which exacerbates the adjustment issues associated with in-migration. The gulf between the dream and the lived reality is similar to that experienced by many who move in search of a rural idyll, but in the case of return migrants, it is perhaps exacerbated by nostalgic memories of 'the way it used to be'. The imagined geographies of home create high expectations which may not be realised.

Being known

Returning rural migrants also experience very keenly the transition from anonymity to being known. The migrant who returns to their own or their partner's original home-place is sharply aware of 'being known' in the local community, precisely because of their ties to that place. They are not just a new arrival in a local community. Instead they arrive with known histories and identities. As Marie explained, although she was 'known' locally, she herself did not feel she 'knew' anybody, as she had been away for so long, which was very frustrating.

> If I was to give advice to people I would say, move somewhere neutral. I was known here. I found that hard when I came home first. People saying hello and [you] wondering 'who the hell are you?'. Because I had lived in a huge city for so long, your friends didn't live next door, you could get lost (Marie).

Being known may not actually assist integration as there may be an assumption that a returning migrant is already well integrated in local society and is not in need of assistance. Moreover, the loss of anonymity can be very difficult to deal with. O'Donnell (2000) reflects on this aspect of returning to a rural part of north Cork from London, suggesting that the strength of family and community structures can be overwhelming and that related to this, there is a

certain pressure to conform to local or family norms. For Marie, this was reflected in her everyday interactions with others:

> When I came home I wasn't Marie any more. I was [my brother's] sister, I was Mammy's daughter. Used to do my head in. It's the Irish way – looking for connections (Marie).

There is a feeling that in order to belong, one must suppress aspects of individuality, which is at the heart of the tension between the migrant's desire for belonging and desire for autonomy. The loss of anonymity can be compounded by a loss of independence, especially for women, who may experience temporary mobility deprivation and restricted employment opportunities in rural areas (McNerney and Gillmor, 2005). In the Caribbean context, Phillips and Potter (2005) argue that return migration is a highly gendered process, highlighting the difficulties faced by female migrants in adjusting to a traditional patriarchal system. Given the persistence of conventional gender structures in rural Ireland (Shortall, 1999), despite their changing nature, a gendered adjustment process might be expected. Indeed, the themes of loneliness as well as loss of anonymity are much more prevalent in the narratives of the women than of men in this research. As Little (2003) shows in her research in rural Britain, the ideal of a normative heterosexuality based on traditional masculine and feminine identities and on the nuclear family is central to notions of the stability of the rural community. A move from New York or London to rural Ireland may be particularly difficult for those who do not conform to established heteronormative expectations, for example Marie, who was separated:

> In the States, I loved going to shows and I loved going here and there. It's the whole Irish mentality of a night out is the pub. I had outgrown the pubs. I mean dressing up to go down to the local just wasn't my scene. […] Ireland's a very couple place as well (Marie).

This tension between belonging and autonomy can become a direct conflict in the lives of some return migrants. For some return migrants, such as those who can conform easily, the two are compatible, and for some, the desire for autonomy is reluctantly suppressed in pursuit of belonging. For others, the conflict is such that it is unsustainable and re-emigration is considered. Kate knows many other return migrants who have re-emigrated, and she believes that people need to be absolutely committed to the idea of returning home before they do so:

> Kate: I say to people [who are thinking of returning to Ireland], you have to be 110 per cent because then it's going to take every ounce of willpower to stick it here.
> Interviewer: Really? You would say it was that tough?
> Kate: Yeah. Yeah. And I can see why couples move back [to the US] without doubt. My sister tells me she's moving [back to Ireland] and I can say nothing to her (Kate).

Insider-outsiders

There is a tension in these narratives between a desire to belong and a sense of being in some ways different. There are moments in the interviews where the migrants grapple with this tension and try to make sense of their own identities. The following exchange with Kate about the label of the 'returned Yank' is revealing. The 'returned Yank' is the historical stereotype of the Irish emigrant returned from the US. The stereotype involves a construction of vulgarity associated with conspicuous personal wealth and a tendency to glorify the achievements of America and to criticise Ireland. According to Hickman (2002), the term 'returned Yank' implies a denigration of what is seen as the 'atavistic Irishry' of the Irish-American and an ambiguity around the Irish-American success story. A number of the return migrants are keen to distinguish themselves from those 'other' returnees who might have lost their Irish accents, or become completely immersed in an 'American' way of life, suggesting that it would be much more difficult for those to be accepted locally. Kate was aware that she and her husband were known as the 'Yanks' when they returned first:

> Kate: Never to us really, but we would hear it from someone else, 'Oh that's the Yanks' house, that big house up there! '

> Interviewer: How did that feel, being described as a Yank?
> Kate: That never bothered me, no, because I myself when I was young would probably have called someone a Yank because they moved back!

She positions herself in the in-group by referring to her non-migrant self. She claims she does not consider it an offensive term, yet, she goes on to talk about her son being 'teased' about being a Yank when he started school in Ireland, implying that she realises the term can be used in a disparaging way.

> I know now my oldest would have been teased when he came to school first and one or two would have said, 'oh there's the Yank'. It's like as if they were pre-warned 'oh there's a Yank coming in to the school'. I felt that afterwards (Kate).

Clearly, she does resent being identified as an outsider in the place she considers to be home. These return migrants narrate their migration experiences in terms of strong discourses of belonging, community and kinship. However, there is also a narrative of 'not belonging' - of loneliness, feeling different, or frustration with loss of autonomy. As Marie tries to articulate her status in the rural community she now lives in, she says:

> In one way you're not different, in another you are – you're the one that came back from the States (Marie).

She recognises that she is at once 'stranger-incomer' and 'insider'. Postcolonial literature highlights the hybrid and in-between nature of migrant identities, and Phillips and Potter (2005) argue that return migration also must be understood within the context of hybrid identities. They use the concept of a liminal space to conceptualise the involvement of return migrants in countless contestations of identity within Barbadian social structures. In a similar way, return migrants to rural Ireland are involved in contestations of identity every day. As they seek to belong while maintaining a sense of self and individuality, they move between the shifting positions of 'insider' and 'outsider'. This is of course not necessarily unique to return migrants, but their situation highlights the blurred and complex nature of insider-outsider constructs in rural life.

This tension between being insider and outsider reflects what Gorton *et al.* (1998) term the paradox of the rural idyll. They argue that the myth of the rural idyll is an ideal that is impossible to live out in reality, due to the tension between communitarian and individualistic values inherent within it. In the narratives of return migrants to Ireland, rurality is constructed in strongly communitarian terms, associated with extended family networks and a sense of community, but also with more individualistic imperatives such as the desire for autonomy. At the heart of this is a paradox, as some elements of the notion of a rural community threaten individual autonomy. As a result, the rural idyll is desired but ultimately rejected (Gorton *et al*, 1998). In the case of rural return, this reflects the contradictory nature of the dream of return.

> It's accepting you wanted to come home. For me it was accepting I wanted to come home and I made the decision. Okay and it's not what I thought it would be. Actually I don't really know if I thought what it would be like (Marie).

Marie recognises that her dream of return was inherently contradictory. Simultaneous belonging and autonomy is impossible because of the suppression of non-conforming identities. This collision between myth and reality highlights the mythic nature of the polarised constructions. As migrants move between home and away, they are in a position to recognise the selective nature of constructions of home and 'away' and the contradictions inherent in dominant narratives. The return journey highlights the contradictions of migrant identity – between the dream of return on the one hand, and the fear of return on the other. For any return migrant, there is a fear of returning to a place that has changed beyond recognition, but also, perhaps even worse, that it may not have changed at all, that the original reasons for leaving have not gone away – the lack of opportunity, the social conservatism, homophobia, or dominance of closed family networks. There is also a fear of leaving behind the friendships and independence that have been found elsewhere. The decision to return embodies this conflict between the dream of return and the fear of return.

> … if exile presumes an initial home and the eventual promise of a return, the questions met with en route consistently breach the boundaries of such an itinerary. The possibility of continuing to identify with such premises weaken and fall away (Chambers, 1994: 2).

Conclusions

The study of rural return highlights the complex nature of rural repopulation processes. It is suggested here that in countries with a history of rural outmigration, such as as Ireland, rural repopulation processes involve multiple processes incorporating both new in-migration and return migration. This means that the social dynamics that emerge as a result are more complex than those associated with a local-incomer dualism. The life narratives of return migrants living in rural Ireland reveal the ways in which they identify themselves as both incomers and locals.

Their narratives of return to rural Ireland do reproduce common counterurbanisation discourses. The myth of the dream of return draws on notions of a rural idyll, in particular on the ideal of community, as well as notions of safety, space and nature. This is bound up with heteronormative values of the nuclear family and the rearing of children in the countryside. Such narratives fit well with classic emigrant discourses of the dream of return, in particular in an Irish context, where traditional constructions of Irishness have had a strong rural emphasis. The highly idealised nature of these narratives however means that there is a risk of disappointment and unfulfilment as reality rarely lives up to expectations. This disappointment may be particularly acute among return migrants, whose expectations may be partly based on memories from childhood and on return visits.

The return migrants' experiences depart from the classic counterurbanisation discourses, however, in a number of ways. The notion of the family is extremely important in their narratives of return migration, with a strong family/kinship discourse interwoven with idyllic myths of rural life. This reflects the strong emphasis on family and kinship in Irish society generally, but is also a common feature of international return migration. Moreover, the idyllic discourse of rural life is complicated by some aspects of the specificity of the return migrant position in rural society. The sense of obligation and responsibility associated with return tempers the idealised nature of the dream of return. In addition, memories of childhood and youth in rural Ireland, together with the experience of regular return visits, can actively challenge the idyllisation of rural life. The lack of anonymity is a further complication experienced by return migrants. Their positions as insiders means that they are 'known,' and the lack of anonymity is felt very strongly as a result. These issues are also bound up with gender and other power relations in rural society, which contribute to a tension between a desire for conformity and a desire for autonomy.

Return migrants therefore can find themselves in an ambiguous place in rural society, adopting both insider and outsider roles, thereby blurring the lines between the two. The stories of return migrants are not part of the orthodoxies of counterurbanisation, as they complicate the dualistic categories of migrant and local as they move from one perspective to the other and position themselves somewhere in that in-between space. Insights from counterurbanisation research can certainly make a valuable contribution to the study of return migration, by providing a framework for understanding the implications of particular types of expectations and values relating to rural life. However, counterurbanisation research tends to focus on cultural conflict between migrants and locals. This research shows that cultural conflict can actually occur within one person's life as the return migrant embodies the tension between idyllised and indigenous constructs. A recognition of this can in turn make a contribution to counterurbanisation research. Narratives of return reveal some of the contradictions of the essentialised discourses of rurality and place, and also how people negotiate these contradictions. They highlight the inadequacy of categories such as 'local' and 'incomer', as well as the contradictory nature of the rural idyll and the dream of return. In the light of calls to move beyond the dualistic constructs of local and incomer, and to recognise marginalised stories of counterurbanisation, this research suggests a need to

recognise the complexity of rural repopulation processes and the fluidity of migrant and local identities.

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