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Title	'Settling back'? A biographical and life-course perspective on Ireland's recent return migration
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Publication date	2008-07-01
Original Citation	Ni Laoire, C.; (2008) ''Settling back'? A biographical and life-course perspective on Ireland's recent return migration'. Irish Geography, 41 (2):195-210. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00750770802076968
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1080/00750770802076968
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Download date	2026-11-16 09:37:22
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/939

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‘Settling back’? A biographical and life-course perspective on Ireland’s recent return migration

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Published in: *Irish Geography* 41(2) 2008

Abstract
This paper uses a biographical and life course perspective to explore some of the key narratives of return among return migrants to Ireland, focusing in particular on the themes of family, child-rearing, relationship breakdown and ‘settling down’. The ways in which return migrants use the concept of life-course transitions in order to make sense of and narrate their migration stories is explored. I argue that their narratives reflect a normative association of life-stage with place, and that return migration reflects the ways in which key events in the individual life course transitions and family lifecycles of 1980s emigrants have intersected with processes of economic and social transformation in Ireland. This occurs within the context of heteronormative and kinship-based ideals of Irish culture and of powerful myths of return. The data used in the paper is taken from the *Narratives of Migration and Return* research project, a north-south cross-border project which assembled an oral archive of 92 return migrant life narratives. In the paper, I draw on 33 of the interviews conducted in the south, which focused on the cohort of return migrants who had emigrated in the 1980s.

Introduction

One of the principal features of the Republic of Ireland’s recent migration turnaround has been a very significant increase in rates of return migration. Despite constituting between about 23 and 55 per cent of immigration flows into the Republic of Ireland between 1996 and 2006 (Central Statistics Office, CSO, 2006), the phenomenon has received relatively little attention from either academics[1] or policy-makers. This paper presents some of the results of a research project, *Narratives of Migration and Return*, a north-south cross-border project which assembled an oral archive of 92 return migrant life narratives[2]. The paper draws on 33 interviews conducted in the south, which focused on the cohort of return migrants who had emigrated in the 1980s. In order to set the life narratives in context, an analysis of some of the available official data on recent return migration to the ROI is presented in the paper. The age, gender and marital status characteristics of return migrants are analysed, which provides a demographic background for an exploration of some of the key narratives of return. There is a particular focus in this paper on the role of life-course transitions and family/kinship norms in narratives of return, specifically on the prominent themes of family, child-rearing, relationship breakdown and ‘settling down’. The ways in which return migrants use the concept of life-course transitions in order to make sense of and narrate their migration stories is explored.

Context

While the Republic of Ireland experienced negative net migration during most of the latter half of the 20th century, the first period of significant return migration was the 1970s, which inspired a number of studies of the economic and social impact of return migration in rural Ireland (Brannick, 1977; Gmelch, 1986; McGrath, 1991). Some of this research was strongly influenced by a modernisation perspective and by the contested debate around the potential of return migration to be a modernising influence, both economically and socially, in marginal rural regions. In contrast, recent return migration, since the mid-1990s, has often been constructed as a response to modernisation rather than a potential cause, with media reports emphasising the ‘lure of the buoyant Irish economy’ (for example, Ward, 1998).

[1] With some notable exceptions, for example, Corcoran (2002 2003), Jones (2003).
[2] ‘Narratives of Migration and Return’, 2003-2005: Participant institutions were University College Cork, Centre for Migration Studies (Omagh), Queens University Belfast and University of Limerick.

In contrast with the 1970s, the 1980s was a decade of extremely high unemployment and high emigration in the Republic of Ireland. Annual rates of emigration increased throughout the decade, peaking in 1989 when over 70,000 left the country (Courtney, 2000). Men outnumbered women in the emigration flow in the 1980s (Courtney, 2000), probably reflecting the greater opportunities for men in the construction industry and sectors such as engineering and computing in London and elsewhere. The majority of this generation of emigrants were young, and most went to live and work in Britain or the US (NESC, 1991). It is this generation of emigrants who have comprised a large part of the recent return migration phenomenon.

The 1980s was followed by unprecedented positive net migration in the ROI during the 1996-2006 period (CSO, 2006). An economic transformation from the mid-1990s onwards, together with a number of other factors, has contributed to high immigration and provided the opportunities for many of the previous generations of emigrants to return to live in Ireland. The population and migration estimates by the CSO include a breakdown by nationality in the annual figures for gross immigration. This means that it is possible to distinguish between returning Irish nationals and other immigrants. The data show that returning Irish dominated the annual immigration flows numerically between 1996 and 1999 (CSO 2003). Since then, numbers of return migrants have remained fairly static while numbers of other immigrants have increased. This has meant that the Irish-born proportion of the annual immigration flows fell from a high of 55 per cent in 1999 to 23 per cent in 2006. In all, approximately 240,000 Irish-born migrants returned to the Republic of Ireland between 1996 and 2006 (CSO 2006).

Since 1986, in addition to the usual question in the Census of Population on place of residence one year previously, a question has been included on whether one has ever lived outside Ireland for at least one year. This can be disaggregated by place of birth, which gives a reasonable indication of the total stock of return migrants in the population at the time of the census, as opposed to the annual flows, although it is admittedly a very broad definition of a return migrant. What these census data show is that by 2002, 16 per cent of the total population of the state had lived outside Ireland (Census of Population 2002). Roughly 9 per cent were returned migrants and approximately 7 per cent were born elsewhere. (However, some of the 7 per cent are children of return migrants and therefore could also be considered to be part of the return migration phenomenon). The 2006 Census reveals that the proportion of returned migrants has remained steady at 9 per cent, while non-Irish migrants now comprise 10 per cent of the population.

Life narrative research

Return migrants clearly comprise a very significant section of the population, but they are also in many ways a relatively invisible population, overshadowed in public consciousness by the apparent visibility of the non-Irish component of immigration. Walter (2001) and others have written about invisibility of Irish migrants in Britain, due to their whiteness and English-speaking. It seems that they are still relatively invisible on their return for similar reasons. The recently completed *Narratives of Migration and Return* project (NMR) aimed to address this invisibility by recording life narratives of recent return migrants for an oral archive. It was a collaborative project between researchers in the south and the north of Ireland. This paper draws on 33 interviews conducted by the author in the south, that is, in Munster, Leinster and Connacht, with people who had emigrated in the 1980s and returned sometime since the mid-1990s. Three of the interviews were with couples, so in total 36 individuals were interviewed.

The research involved collecting life narrative interviews, exploring return migrants' experiences of growing up in Ireland, (e)migration in the 1980s/early 1990s, and return sometime during the late 1990s/early 21st century. The interviews were mainly individual face-to-face interviews (apart from the three interviews with couples). They were one-off interviews, usually conducted in the participant's home, and tended to last between about 75 and 120 minutes. What has emerged is an oral history of life in and outside Ireland from the perspective of those who were young in the 1970s, came of age at a time of severe economic depression, were young Irish people living and working in Britain, Germany, the US and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s, and later returned to a very different 'Celtic Tiger' or post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, at a different stage in their lives. Full digital

recordings of the oral interviews have been placed in an archive, which will be accessible in the future via the participant universities.

The research targeted a representative sample of the 1980s and early 1990s generation of emigrants, using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. 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), the research targeted some of the main social groups who had emigrated in the 1980s and early 1990s, and who had been returning in recent years. These included construction workers and those working in the caring professions (nursing, social work/care). People who had emigrated with little or no qualifications or resources were also targeted. In particular we aimed to include people who had been undocumented migrants in the US, and we also targeted graduates. A broad spectrum of other occupations was also included and an attempt was made to achieve a balance in terms of gender (20 were female and 16 were male). 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 urban and rural areas across Munster, Leinster and Connacht, and were recruited through Irish emigrant/return migrant support organisations, graduates' associations, personal contacts and an element of snowball sampling.

The research adopted a biographical approach to migration, as advocated by Halfacree and Boyle (1993), and was also influenced by the narrative approach to the study of lives (drawing for example on Josselson and Lieblich, 1993; Lentin, 2000). The biographical approach recognises that migration is part of a person's biography and is bound up with a person's past as well as their present and future. The life story can illuminate the ways in which migration is bound up with an individual's biography, revealing the tensions between internal and external processes, and between structure and agency. This facilitates an understanding of the complex relationships between individual consciousness and the cultural, social and material frameworks within which people live their lives. Individual lives are set within their wider historical and social contexts, illuminating individual and group experiences and representations of social processes (Ní Laoire, 2000; Findlay and Stockdale, 2003; Halfacree, 2004). Drawing on this framework, the research has attempted to tease out the interconnections between return migrant biographies and their wider historical, cultural and social contexts.

One of the key debates in the literature on biographical approaches surrounds the question of the authenticity and reliability of personal testimonies (Roberts, 2002). It is increasingly argued that the meanings people give to their lives and events are more valid than attempts to elicit any kind of truth. Narrative can be defined as a process whereby individual life experience is 'storied' (Polkinghorne, 1995). It recognises the role of the teller in constructing her/his own life narrative, through a process of selection, ordering and giving meaning to particular events and stories. According to Roberts (2002: 119), individuals 'construct their own narratives according to their interpretation of experience in socio-cultural contexts'. This research focuses on the ways in which return migrants construct their own narratives of return, according to their own interpretations of their material and social contexts in Ireland and in the diaspora. The themes of family, child-rearing, relationship breakdown and 'settling down' emerged very strongly in their narratives and this paper focuses on the context and construction of these particular narratives of return.

Life course transitions

The context of these narratives is one of a highly specific age-group. The largest cohort of return migrants in the 2002 census is the 30-39 year age group. Taken together with the 40-44 year group, this amounts to a total number of 120,000 people. Given the age composition of the 1980s emigrants, it is highly likely that most of these 120,000 return migrants emigrated in the 1980s or early 1990s. The census data reveals that, of these, 56 per cent returned from Britain, with 14 per cent having returned from the US, and the rest from a range of countries. The sample of 36 interviewees roughly reflects the general characteristics of the cohort, with all but two falling within the 30-49 year age group at the time of interview (a couple of years after the 2002 Census) in 2004/5. Seventeen of the informants had lived in Britain while 16 had lived in the US and a further nine destinations were also represented. This is therefore quite a specific cohort, characterised by emigration to Britain, the US and elsewhere in their teens and twenties in the 1980s and return in

their thirties and forties. This means that return migration is likely to coincide with key life course events such as family formation, child-bearing, child-rearing, relationship breakdown or ageing of parents.

Popular discourses associate high levels of return migration with the 'Celtic Tiger' phenomenon and the recent economic transformation in Ireland. With headlines such as **'**Top jobs tempt emigrants home' (Sheahan, 2000) hitting the newspapers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a sense in which return migrants were seen to be reacting to Ireland's economic transformation. Jones (2003) has investigated the relationship between multinational (MNC) employment and return migration, postulating that MNC employment is an important factor in encouraging return migration. In fact he found that MNC employment was an important factor only where such employment exists, that is, in the east, and that personal/family-related factors were more important in the west. Corcoran's (2002, 2003) work on return migration among professionals from the US emphasises non-economic factors and what she calls a quest for anchorage and desire for organic community as central motivations.

This research reflects both Jones' (2003) and Corcoran's (2002, 2003) findings. The economic boom was not a primary narrative among returnees but instead more of an underlying theme; it provided a set of circumstances that enabled return and set a series of events in motion, for example, a sense of optimism and vitality in Ireland, friends and peers starting to return, business opportunities emerging in Ireland. These issues do recur in the narratives of return migrants, but they provide a backdrop to more primary reasons such as a desire to raise children in Ireland, a desire to be near to family (elderly parents, younger siblings, extended family), relationship breakdown, a need for change of job or career, or a general narrative of 'settling down' or 'making a new start'. In other words, the prominent reasons presented in the life narratives relate to family, to their own personal development and to key transition points in their lives.

The relationship between the timing of key life events and migration has been well-documented (Fischer and Malmberg, 2001; Ley and Kobayashi, 2005). In order to conceptualise this, the notion of the life course is useful, as a way of understanding how individual biographies are structured around a series of transitions and life events. Brettell's (2002) framework draws on the notion of the life course to understand migration as a timed event in the intersection of the individual life course, the family life-cycle and historical time. According to Hareven and Adams (1982), the life course involves the transition of individuals into different family roles and individual stages, within the context of wider social and economic processes. Unlike the life-cycle approach, the concept of the life course recognises that these transitions occur at different ages and rates, depending on historical and cultural context. However, life courses are also socially constructed, with particular norms and expectations being associated with particular 'stages' in the life course. Central to the concept is the timing of particular key events in the individual's life course. As argued by Hareven and Adams (1982), the most crucial aspect of timing is the point of intersection between an individual's life and wider historical or contextual forces – the relation between biography and context. The work of the Personal Narratives Group (1989) is also very revealing here. They show that the point of intersection between an individual's life course and a specific historical moment 'provides insight into the ways that particular lives take the shape they do and how each woman makes sense of her world' (Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 21). In other words, people attempt to make sense of their lives and to locate themselves in the world in a way that fits with their own biographical experiences to date. These moments of intersection can be revealed and negotiated through the telling of the life narrative, if the telling itself is understood as a process through which order and meaning are applied to personal and historical experience as they are 'storied'.

Narratives of return and the life-course

The desire to return is an enduring theme of diasporic cultures. Often termed the myth of return, it is considered to be rooted in a nostalgic and romantic view of a homeland, although as Brah (1996) argues, it may be more appropriate to refer to a 'homing desire,' which is not necessarily tied to a fixed place of origin, rather than to a myth of return to a homeland. Markowitz and Stefansson (2004) are also critical of the assumption that the desire to return is necessarily a nostalgic dream rooted in the past. Instead, they argue that it is very often a practical and future-oriented project. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the dream of return or homing desire plays an important

symbolic role in the maintenance of diasporic identities and ideologies. Through its emphasis on allegiance to the homeland it contributes to the construction of the shared narratives, values and practices that are central to the constitution of diasporic cultures. Transnational families are crucial institutions in the reproduction of these narratives and values, as research in a range of international contexts shows (for example, Constable, 1999; Gray, 2003; Ryan, 2004; Sutton, 2004; Panagakos, 2004; Chamberlain, 2006). Family networks involving ties of obligation, loyalty, trust and reciprocity operate across transnational boundaries through processes of circular migration, remittances, communication, return visits and return migration. Often, the narrative of return is an important mechanism through which these ties are maintained, through its role in rendering socially acceptable the decision to migrate or to stay. As Constable (1999) argues, continuing to imagine a possible return makes staying away socially acceptable and thus maintains those transnational family ties and social relations. Gray (2003) and Ryan (2004) have explored the nature of transnational family networks in the Irish diaspora. They both emphasise the highly gendered nature of such networks and the ways in which women continue to play very gender-specific roles within them. As Panagakos (2004) also found in the context of the Greek diaspora, transnational networks can reinforce traditional gendered and heteronormative cultural ideals. In an Irish diasporic context, these ideals revolve around the importance of family, kinship and heterosexuality (Gray, 2006), and are bolstered in different ways by narratives of return.

Many of the return migrants in this research 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), West Africa (Tiemoko, 2003) and the Caribbean (Condon, 2005). 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. 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. There is a strong narrative of returning to be part of a kinship network that is not physically present, or if so, not to the same extent, outside Ireland. Condon's (2005) research on return migration to the Caribbean refers to this as a 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 the human resources that migrants expect to be able to tap into on their return.

This can be understood also in the context of intergenerational ties and responsibilities. From a life course perspective, it is argued that the 'adult' or 'mid-life' years are a time of increased responsibility towards other generations, both older and younger. This can be complicated by migration. Gray (2003), writing about the Irish diaspora, has highlighted 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.
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 tend to become less beneficiaries and more benefactors in family networks. In Ireland, this phenomenon is 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 in narratives of return migration, the migrant constructs her/himself as a provider of support to others in the family network, in particular ageing parents, as expressed by Tim:

> One of the huge plus's, is, my Mum is an elderly person, she's well into her 80s. I was away from her for a long time, and I missed, not seeing her. She lives [in this town] and I can see her not once a day but three or four times a day if I wish, and look after her I guess, because she lives on her own (Tim[3], late 40s, returned from Africa).

However, many return migrants, such as Sarah, also recognise that there is an element of interdependence involved in these family networks. She talked about how she came to the decision to return to Ireland:

[3] Some of the participants' names have been changed. They were given the option of anonymity or being named.

> 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 [the neighbour] down the road, or [my friend']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, mid-30s, returned from Britain).

As well as narrating return in terms of relationships with older generations or extended family, return is also narrated in terms of responsibilities towards children. One of the most prominent themes in the migrants' narratives of return is the desire to bring up their children in Ireland. In the context of the Irish diaspora, this can be understood with reference to Gray's (2006) argument that gender and kinship norms are central to the reproduction of Irish migrant and ethnic culture. She argues that family and children are dense sites for the transfer and reproduction of 'culture' and that the figure of the child comes to represent particular gendered and heterosexual norms of Irish migrant identity. According to Gray (2006), migrants' anxieties regarding identity, Irishness and the future are transferred to their actual or potential children.

Among return migrants in this study, the strength of the narrative of returning to rear children in Ireland, together with the age profile of the recent return migrant population, suggests that many of them did return with children who were born outside Ireland. It is very difficult to identify children of return migrants in the official statistics, as it is not possible to disaggregate foreign-born children of return migrants from foreign-born children of other migrants, especially as many will be children of 'mixed' couples, ie, one Irish and one non-Irish parent. However, if the Census 2002 figures for all migrant children in the population[4] (56,821) are compared with those for all children with nationalities other than Irish in the population (31,971), it is evident that the former is higher than the latter. Therefore, it is likely that a significant proportion of migrant children have Irish nationality and therefore may be children of return migrants.

Ireland is commonly constructed by the return migrants as a safe place in which to bring up children, characterised by a sense of freedom and space, a good education system, and supported by an extended family network. Michelle constructs Ireland as a place of relative freedom and safety for children, in comparison to England, where she had lived previously:

> I definitely wouldn't go back now. There's a lot of things here, especially for the children, they can go out there, it's a cul-de-sac, there's no traffic, there's a green, they just go out all the time and play themselves, I don't need to, well I check on them, but they're out all day…. Whereas in England, even though it wasn't a dangerous area, nobody just left their kids outside to play, you just didn't (Michelle, late 30s, returned from Britain).

While Michelle is on the one hand constructing Ireland as a safe and free place for children, and England as the opposite, she also realises that in fact she still does have to check on the children in Ireland, and where they lived in England actually 'wasn't a dangerous area.' However, she is using this general oppositional construct of Ireland v. England in order to highlight what she sees as a cultural distinction. Michelle argues that there are cultural differences between Ireland and England in terms of children's levels of spatial freedom. So what seems to be a statement about moving from an urban to a suburban environment is given a cultural dimension in her return narrative.

The proximity to extended family is also used by return migrants to support the view that Ireland is a good place in which to bring up children. The children are seen to benefit from regular contact with their grandparents, cousins and other relatives.

> 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, early 40s, returned from US and Australia).

[4] 1-14 year olds who have ever lived abroad for at least one year

While this is presented as an advantage for the children, it also satisfies cultural expectations around family and kinship by maintaining kinship ties. The importance of practices which enable 'knowing' one's kin through co-presence is also highlighted in other diasporic contexts (Mason, 2004; Sutton, 2004). On close examination, the narrative of returning to rear children is also about entering a new phase in the life course, that of family formation. In other words, return is bound up with the needs of parenthood and the nuclear and extended family as well as the needs of children.

> I think the time when most people do it [return] 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, late 30s, returned from Britain).

Michelle constructs immigrant life in London as being more suited to being single or childless than to having a family, due in part to the lack of extended family, a common difficulty for immigrant families. Similarly, for Emma, life changed dramatically when she had a child.

> When [our son] was maybe about 15-16 months old, I started to get the cold feet again, I was wanting to go home again. Because it kind of changes, the whole scene changes, it's like a total new scene. You know, you're not going out – well, it's not that you're not going, you're not going out as much. Everything's kind of child-oriented. You're thinking, God I really don't want to bring him up in the schools over here … I just said, no, by the time he's two, now, I'll head off. Yeah, we'll go for it when he's two. […] Your whole outlook just changes when you have a baby, you just want to set up house somewhere. And Ireland seemed to be the easiest place to do it, because I had no green card (Emma, late 20s, returned from US).

She saw having a child as marking a new phase in her life, a phase which for her was incompatible with being an undocumented immigrant in the US. The return move then was associated with the transition between two different life-course phases. This supports Markowitz and Stefansson's (2004) view that return migration is a future-oriented project and is as much about 'homemaking' as it is about 'homecoming'.

Many informants also expressed a desire that their children would be 'brought up Irish' and felt that this could happen only if they were reared in Ireland.

> It was just the future for the kids really. Even though I say I was very happy there and I loved London and I could always say England was very good to me […], at the same time, there was always a piece of me that would prefer to be known to be Irish than to be English, and I felt that if we stayed there that the children would grow up and they would be English really and I didn't really want that. I wanted them to be Irish really (Michelle, late 30s, returned from Britain).

Gray (2006) also reveals similar discourses in her research with Irish migrant women in London, where there is a desire for their children to 'be Irish', associated in this case with a requirement that both parents be Irish. In both cases, the figure of the child acquires great symbolic significance, representing particular visions of cultural continuity.

It could be argued that these narratives of returning to bring up children and to 'set up home' contribute to a set of norms around the ideal way in which to return. This is articulated clearly by Claire who was single when she moved back:

> I was always coming back. I suppose, like a lot of us, we were all kind of waiting to get married or meet the right man and come back or *settle back*. […] The dream was to meet an Irishman and come back and settle down. That's what the dream was (Claire, late 30s, returned from Britain). [Emphasis added.]

Interestingly, for Claire and her female peers, she claims they had hoped to form relationships (crucially, with Irishmen) in England and then to move back to Ireland as couples - to 'settle back'.

This very particular scenario was the only one that fitted in with the diasporic myth of return and the normative heterosexual and gendered expectations of Irish diasporic society as well as the realities of their lives. Gray (2006) argues that particular normative notions of Irish culture are reproduced through heterosexual coupling and biological reproduction. This contributes to the creation of idealised scenarios which link the formation of particular types of heteronormative relationships with return migration. The dominance of narratives in this research which link return with 'settling back' can be understood in this context. Return migrants relate the circumstances of their own lives and their own migrations to these idealised scenarios and can draw on these to frame their narratives of return.

Normative association between life-course and place

It is evident that these narratives of return involve a strong association of particular life-stages with particular types of places, in which Ireland is constructed as a place that is associated with settling down, security, family and community. This reflects popular romantic representations of Ireland as a haven from modernity, often reproduced in the literature and film of the diaspora, as well as in Irish tourism images (see Duffy, 1995; Gibbons, 2002; Quinn, 1994). In opposition to this, the other (usually England or the US) is often represented as a place of danger, immorality, and anomie. In return migrant narratives, the emigrant destination, particularly for those who lived in traditional urban emigrant destinations (such as New York, London, Glasgow) tends to be associated with transience and youth. The context of this is that these Irish migrants did tend to fill gaps in global labour markets, particularly in globalising cities such as New York and London. They worked in migrant employment niches - in the informal economy in the US, in caring professions such as nursing and social care in the US and Britain, in the construction industry across England and Germany. They adopted transient and flexible lifestyles to fit with flexible labour market requirements, whether that meant working in the informal economy, regular job changes or frequent migrations.

Fincher's (1998) work on the city highlights the normative association of the inner city with youth and young adulthood, and of the suburb with the nuclear family. It is suggested here that this type of association also occurs in transnational migration, where traditional migrant destinations (major cities within the global system) become associated in migrant narratives as well as in public policies with lifestyles deemed appropriate to young adulthood (insecurity, flexibility, independence, freedom and transience). These urban environments can be viewed as places where people are, on the one hand, emancipated from traditional ties, but due to the concentration of different people, can also readily find others like them (Pile, 1999). Family ties can be replaced by more fluid friendship networks which provide the support and companionship with which to survive the strongly individualizing nature of such lifestyles. This impulse to replace family with friendship ties is also a central element of dominant constructions of young adulthood (Heath, 2004), lending further support to the idea of a normative association between place and life-course events.

Shared ethnicity or background is one of the factors which facilitates the formation of such networks among immigrants in the city. Zelinsky and Lee (1998) propose the concept of heterolocalism to signify the non-local social networks which emerge among immigrants, sometimes through churches, business associations and other ethnic organisations, but often without any formal basis and developing simply through personal contacts. Such networks were a very important of life for many Irish emigrants living in cities such as London and New York in the 1980s (Corcoran, 1991). Involvement in these networks was often based on being 'from Ireland' but could also incorporate others with similar interests or backgrounds, depending on the social context. This was particularly important for undocumented migrants in the US, who relied heavily on the support structures of their Irish and migrant networks in order to cope with the insecurity of their lifestyles.

> There was so many people illegal there at the time, we were all in the one boat, so we all kind of understood each other when we'd meet each other out. I think the New York Irish were very supportive of each other. […] You'd go into the bars or restaurants and they'd [say] 'Are you looking for work? Do you need work?' They were very good that way (Kate, early 40s, returned from US).

While it is evident from the interviews with return migrants who were undocumented migrants in the US that there were hardships associated with that lifestyle, not least in terms of restrictions on travel back to Ireland, many actually spoke with surprising affection of the freedom and camaraderie of that lifestyle.

> I was just getting paid in cash, so there was nothing official. Nobody knew I existed, I guess, like the thousands of others, so there was no red tape in my life whatsoever. It was all very simple, very uncomplicated. I knew exactly how much I was earning […] I've no complaints. Life was very good (John, early 40s, returned from US).

Of course, it must be remembered that this is a retrospective view, from the perspective of a migrant fortunate enough to have been able to return home. For him, as for many others, there was also a sense that once that life-stage had passed, it was time to live in a different place.

> I think we all started to know at that stage that we were getting to a different stage in our lives, things were changing a bit you know! And since then, two or three of the other couples have kids […] Ah things have definitely changed you know. I'm 41 now, and I don't feel it, I, how would I say, I'm a lot more easygoing now, I don't need too much excitement now! […] I'm quite happy to be at this stage in my life. I look back on New York with very fond memories because I saw amazing things and for me, I did amazing things, I met a lot of people, stuff like that, I've no regrets at all. At the same time, I knew when the time came that I wanted to leave, that I didn't want to stay there any longer (John, early 40s, returned from US).

For John, this is a conscious decision, for others, it is a more hidden/subconscious narrative in their stories.

> Nice to do something different and meet different people. It was definitely worth it. And I'd say the same thing about coming back - it's nice to *settle back* again. Probably y'know… we had very happy times in London and I loved it there, but having said that, I just could never see myself maybe when I was 50 or 60 living there. I didn't really fancy that! (Michelle, late 30s, returned from Britain). [Emphasis added.]

This narrative is one of rejection of living a particular life-stage in a country other than Ireland. The desirable qualities associated with life in Ireland that are presented by the return migrants are often simply those of citizenship, homeownership, suburbia, family, but these qualities are bound up closely with 'Ireland' in their narratives of return. This reflects a normative association of place and life-stage, in which Ireland is associated, in these migrant narratives, with a particular dream of 'settling down,' or to use Markowitz and Stefansson's (2004) term, with 'homemaking'. Furthermore, the dream is bound up with powerful heteronormative articulations of the Irish diasporic myth of return.

Complicating return migration norms

There is a dominant tendency then in the migrants' own narratives to associate return migration with transitions into family formation and child-rearing and to construct return in terms of 'settling back'. Migrants' actual life circumstances of course may not readily cohere with the idealised scenarios. Many people may find themselves returning to Ireland in circumstances which do not fit with their own expectations, often shaped by dominant norms. For example, Claire (late 30s, returned from Britain), who was single when she moved back, found the experience of returning as a single woman quite difficult, especially in the light of her own and others' expectations. Her narrative suggests that she felt she should have had a partner with whom to share the experience and that there was a certain stigma attached to returning as a single woman. Not only did she and her female Irish friends dream of meeting Irishmen in Britain, but according to Claire, they were 'waiting' to do so before moving back. The irony of this was not lost on her as she reflected that at a certain point (when return migration became a real possibility) she did come to the realisation that it would be easier to meet an Irishman in Ireland than in Britain, which contributed to her decision to move back. The changing economic and social circumstances in Ireland made return as independent

careerwoman a possibility for her, which meant that the old dream of an 'Irish' marriage and return was redundant.

Despite the strength of the narrative of return and family formation, associated with the image of the young couple or nuclear family, statistics show that it seems that return migrants are actually more likely that the rest of the population to be separated/divorced, and also more likely to be single. Census data is available for the marital status of 'one-year' in-migrants, that is, those who migrated into Ireland in the year prior to the Census in 2002. This can be subdivided by place of birth, distinguishing between Irish-born and non-Irish-born. Figures 1 and 2 show marital status by age (among 20-64 year olds) among one-year return migrants and the rest of the population[5]. What is immediately striking is the relatively low marriage rates among return migrants, across all age groups. This is related both to high rates of separation/divorce and high rates of 'singleness'. The data in Figures 1 and 2 are for recent returnees but Punch and Finneran (1999) similarly found evidence of high rates of separation[6] among the total stock of return migrants in 1996, at 8.1 per cent, as opposed to 4.8 per cent for non-migrants.

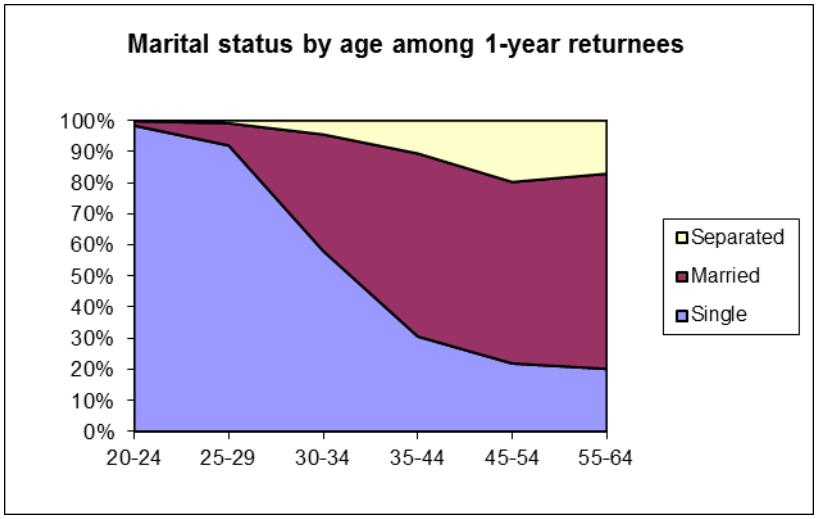


Figure 1: **Marital status by age among one-year returnees**
Source: Census 2002

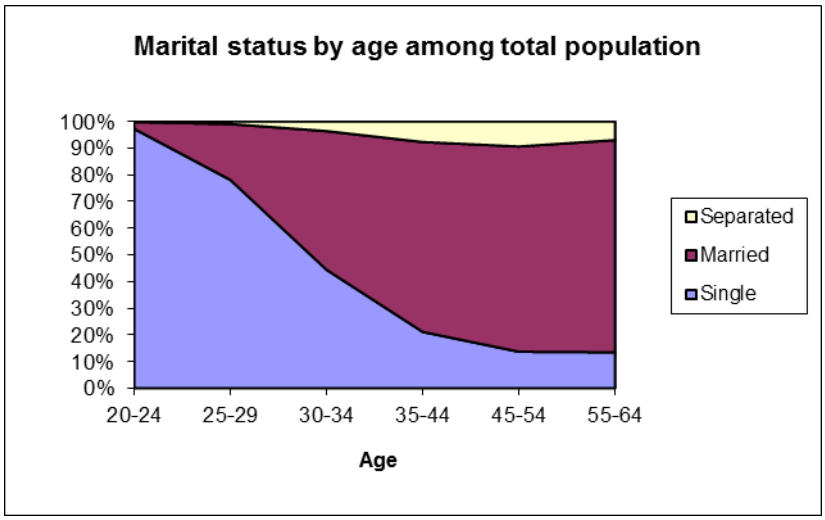


Figure 2: Marital status by age among total population
Source: Census 2002

[5] As percentage of all ever-married aged 20-64
[6] Total separated/divorced as proportion of total ever-married, ie, married, separated and divorced.

A number of reasons can be suggested for the high rate of 'singleness' among return migrants. One is that it may be concealing high numbers of people in long-term relationships or cohabiting. Another is that people may return *because* they are single, for example Sarah:

> I was 28 and I realised that I had to make the decision, am I going to meet someone, form a relationship, get married, have kids, spend my life in [this city], or do I make the decision now to come back [to Ireland] before that sort of thing happens. So that's what I did (Sarah, mid-30s, returned from Britain).

Sarah consciously made the decision to form a relationship and have a family *in Ireland* and not in Britain. Like a number of other informants, she said that the only circumstance in which she could envisage a future in the other country for herself would be if she had met and formed a relationship with someone there. However, she rejects this possibility in favour of the 'Irish' option, and constructs an opposition between the moral quality of relationships in Ireland and in Britain to support this decision:

> Pretty much, well, from what I could tell, you couldn't trust a man not to two-time you anyway, over there. There just was too much of a level of promiscuity, or even if you were married, having affairs, all that kind of thing… (Sarah, mid-30s, returned from Britain).

So, Ireland is associated in Sarah's narrative with safe and morally acceptable possibilities of family formation. Her narrative reflects and reproduces normative expectations linking family formation with return migration, but uses these in order to make sense of her return move as a single person.

Punch and Finneran (1999) postulate that migration may follow marriage breakdown, or may contribute to it. It is possible that marriage breakdown may precipitate a decision by a migrant to return to Ireland to start a new life, a kind of extension of the residential move that often accompanies marital breakdown, as discussed by Flowerdew and Al-Hamad (2004) in relation to Britain. This may reflect the stresses of the migrant lifestyle and a possible higher propensity of migrants to experience marital difficulties than non-migrants. This was the case among a number of interviewees, such as for example, Vicky, and also David, both of whom decided to move back to Ireland when long-term relationships ended.

> I had perhaps wanted to leave that situation a couple of years earlier and it hadn't worked out that way. I was quite unhappy there for a few years […] The attraction to come back to Ireland was, to, em, it was to come home. I wouldn't say it was really to my parents although they were very good to me and they've stood by me through all of this… it was to come home to somewhere I knew. I'd done enough of adventure […], and basically I wanted to come back to be with all the friends I'd made over the years and to have a good life again. I didn't want to start anew again and make a whole new group of friends again somewhere else. I wanted to come back to a safe place (Vicky, early 30s, returned from continental Europe).

> … and I guess the break-up of my marriage was really starting to hit me, and the previous couple of years had just been, […] it was just one thing after another, I was feeling a bit overwhelmed I think at that point. I just sort of decided one afternoon, it wasn't something I'd even been, it just came into my head, I just said I think I better go back to Ireland and, just kind of regroup and see what things are like there, be closer to family and friends and stuff… (David, early 40s, returned from US).

For Vicky, the end of the relationship meant the beginning of a new phase of her life, one she wanted to spend in a 'safe' place, away from the insecurities of the immigrant lifestyle. Similarly, for David, his marriage breakdown was part of a series of events that led to his decision to move back to Ireland 'to regroup'. They both construct Ireland in terms which cohere with the image of Ireland as a type of safe haven, a place apart from the pressures of their modern lifestyles, and a place where they could connect with family and friendship networks. These stories of return and relationship breakdown, while they do not fit with an idealised notion of return, do associate migration with a key life course transition and in doing so, also draw on popular return migrant narratives of Ireland as a place of community, family and safety. So, while many migrants return to Ireland in circumstances which do not conform to the idealised expectations of return migration, their

narratives refer to these idealisations and are still articulated through these common constructions of Ireland as a particular type of place.

Conclusions

These narratives of return and the life course are united by a common theme around an expectation or desire to spend a particular life stage in Ireland, whether it be family formation, child-rearing, recovery from relationship breakdown, care for elderly parents, re-connection with siblings and friends, a career change (a topic for another paper) or simply a new start.
The migrants' life-course transitions coincided with a time when return to Ireland was economically possible and their stories reflect this coincidence. Their personal biographies intersect with historical context in a way which allows them to order their stories around the normative association of place and life-course stage. Of course, for many migrants, these norms regarding life-course stages conflict with their own particular circumstances, contributing to tensions which are revealed through their life narratives, whether in their inherent contradictions or in the moments in which they challenge these norms.

The narratives construct a normative association between life-stage and place, associating Ireland with 'settling back' and the migrant destination with youth and transience. This reproduces powerful diasporic and global narratives which construct Ireland as a place apart from the ills of modernity, and are re-worked by return migrants into their own life narratives in ways which cohere with their own biographies. This occurs within the context of heteronormative and kinship-based ideals of Irish culture (Gray, 2006) and of powerful myths of return. Return migrant narratives reflect idealised notions of family formation and return migration, drawing on and reproducing the powerful diasporic myth of return in ways which cohere both with cultural expectations around family and kinship as well as their own biographical realities, so that their return narratives become stories of 'settling back'.

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