SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

'You would never pick up the thread from where you left off': Older Irish women migrants' narratives of non-return, post-retirement

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Abstract

There is growing interest in the extent of post-retirement return among migrants. However, most research focuses on those approaching or soon after retirement, e.g. in their 60s. Less is known about how return, and indeed non-return, decision-making evolves in later years, with calls for more research on migrants in the old-old age groups. Moreover, there are indications that women migrants may be less inclined to return than their male counterparts. Our article seeks to advance understanding in this area of research by drawing upon rich qualitative data from Irish women migrants, who worked as nurses in Britain and are now entering older age, e.g. 70s–80s. Many simply asserted that they could not leave their adult children and grandchildren. However, using the embedding framework, through a life course lens, we argue that non-return may reflect complex processes of disembedding and non-belonging in the origin country – which are less easy to articulate.

INTRODUCTION

No, it just didn't occur to me to go back because I find that Ireland changed a lot from when I grew up... and I thought it probably would never be the same to go back again... you would never pick

> up the thread from where you left off. So, I was just happy with my life here and I never thought of going back, not to settle anyway
>
> (Aisling)

> We did at one stage think, oh well, maybe when we retire, we'll buy something in Ireland, go home, but it's not really been something we would want to do
>
> (Ciara)

Considerations of return, post-retirement, are of increasing interest at the nexus of the ageing and migration literature (Torres & Hunter, 2023). For many migrants retirement 'appears as a new transition where the question of return can be reactivated' (Bolzman & Bridji, 2019: 17). While post-retirement return may be an aspiration articulated by migrants (Bettin et al., 2018), the reality of return, especially after decades of migration, may be more complex than initially anticipated (Anwar, 1979; Walsh & Näre, 2016).

Bolzman & Bridji found retirement can provoke 'ambivalent feelings about the future' (2019: 17). As people retire from the labour market, 'the need to work no longer retains migrants in the society of residence', nonetheless, that is not to suggest they simply return to their origin country. Opportunities 'to play a role as grandparents' and, as older people, 'health issues and concerns' may keep them in the destination country (2019: 17).

Indeed, at least in the European context, there is evidence that migrants tend to stay, post-retirement, rather than return to their origin countries (King et al., 2021). Instead, the pattern of 'pendulum migration' has been noted among retired migrants (Klok et al., 2017) as they travel back and forth, often for extended periods (Buffel, 2017; Ganga, 2006; Zontini, 2015). However, such mobility is contingent upon factors like health and financial resources. Thus, as argued in this paper, one should avoid putting all 'retired migrants' into the same category. Applying a life course lens, we must pay attention to ageing and the health conditions likely to be associated with it.

Moreover, research on expectations of return is often conducted with relatively young migrants when the possibility of future return is still an option (Vathi & King, 2017). Less is known about 'the oldest members of the migrant population' (Buffel, 2017: 11) with calls for more research on the 'old-old' – especially those over 80 years (Baldassar et al., 2007). Furthermore, we need to understand more about the 'spatio-temporal regimes of mobility associated with retirement migration', recognizing how inequalities and privileges 'unfold in different geographical contexts' (King et al., 2021: 1211).

Our paper aims to advance understanding of these issues by drawing upon rich, in-depth qualitative research with 45 older Irish nurses, most of whom lived and worked in Britain for over 50 years and are now retired. Our work is innovative because it focuses on the 'old–old' i.e. mid-to-late 70s and 80s – over a decade post-retirement. Most participants were adamant that they would not return and, given their age, were unlikely to change their minds. Hence, this dataset offers insights into why retired migrants decide not to return.

Irish migrants in Britain are disproportionately old (Census, 2021) and disproportionately female given the large numbers of Irish women recruited to work in Britain post-war, including as nurses (Ryan, 2007). Hence, the older Irish female migrant population in Britain offers interesting opportunities to explore experiences of ageing, retirement and decision-making regarding non-return for migrants who arrived as young, single women.

To contextualize the decision-making process we apply the 'embedding' framework (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015) to the case of non-return. We explore how the various dimensions of differentiated embedding, in particular places over time, may frame decisions about not returning to live in Ireland. Applying a life course lens, we seek to advance understanding of the sustained effort required to maintain embedding in the origin country and how opportunities, but also motivations, to do so may wax and wane through particular life stages.

TO RETURN OR NOT TO RETURN – POST-RETIREMENT

When considering return, immigration regimes matter. Colonial relations between Ireland and Britain created the necessity for a 'common travel area' (Cabinet & Home Office, 2022), meaning that Irish migrants continued to benefit from borderless movement between Britain and Ireland despite Britain's exit from the European Union. Hence, immigration regimes do not pose a barrier to Irish returnees.

Moreover, geographical proximity and the ability to maintain transnational connections, through visits, also matter (Buffel, 2017). Indeed, regular visits may assuage the need to return permanently (Miah & King, 2018; Zontini, 2015). However, visits do not necessarily reinforce a sense of belonging in the origin country (Buffel, 2017; Ryan, 2023). As Tezcan found with older migrants in Germany: 'when transnational involvement is high, return intentions seem to be shaped by a comparison between host and home country' (Tezcan, 2019: 198). As we discuss below, visits may highlight changes over time whilst the migrant has been abroad. Drawing on Irish retirees, our paper contributes to understanding why, despite regular visits, geographical proximity and open borders, migrants may still be reluctant to return permanently.

Furthermore, age and well-being matter for retired migrants' ongoing transnational mobility. Thus, we need to understand mobility through the additional perspectives of immobility and sedentary tendencies, especially in older age (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011). Access to healthcare becomes an increasing priority in older age when migrants are no longer able to travel regularly and when health provision is more easily accessed in specific locations (Hunter, 2023; Miah & King, 2018). As revealed in our study with older migrants, and discussed in later sections, the ability to travel back and forth, and intentions to permanently return, are increasingly informed by concerns about access to formal health care and networks of informal support.

While many migrants initially plan short-term migration and express the intention of permanent return, these plans can change significantly over time, through the life course, for example as family formations emerge and transform migrants' attachments 'here' and 'there'. Research shows how having children can facilitate local embedding for migrant families as children go to school, make friends and create new social networks (Ryan, 2023). Furthermore, as migrants form families and set up households, including buying property and investing in the destination country, they create financial attachments to the place (Ganga, 2006; Zontini, 2015). Migrants therefore can develop familiarity with local neighbourhoods in the destination society where important social networks reside (Buffel, 2017) facilitating embedding (Ryan, 2023). As migrants grow older, they may become more reliant on these local networks, including children and grandchildren, as sources of reciprocal care arrangements (Zontini, 2015). These care relationships are often gendered (Kloc-Nowak & Ryan, 2023). Indeed, as widely noted in the literature, gender appears to play a pivotal role in attitudes toward return, with women less keen to return than men (Bolzman & Bridji, 2019; Tezcan, 2019; Zontini, 2015). While focusing on women migrants, we also consider how their attitudes towards return were often presented in contrast to their husbands who, in many cases, were keener to return to Ireland.

Migrants' nostalgia for 'home' and 'the past' are themes noted by many researchers (Miah & King, 2018). As Lam and Yeoh explain, 'home' can become 'a nostalgic construction, based on a longing for a lost time and place, which simultaneously provides a critical foil to present dissatisfactions' (Lam & Yeoh, 2004:152). Nevertheless, feeling nostalgic for home does not necessarily mean a desire to return to live there (Lam & Yeoh, 2004). Of course, not all migrants feel nostalgic. A study by Leavey et al. (2004) with older Irish migrants, observed low levels of nostalgia about growing up in the harsh economic and sociocultural reality of Ireland in the 1950s–60s. Female participants in particular tended to have unsentimental memories of the conservative social attitudes and limited opportunities for girls in Ireland in their youth (Leavey et al., 2004). Many of our participants also spoke about the limited opportunities they faced as young women in 1950s Ireland. Hence, our paper seeks to advance understanding of why women may be less enthusiastic about post-retirement returns.

In this paper, we draw upon and advance research on post-retirement non-return. In particular, our dataset adds new insight into the attitudes and decision-making of women migrants, especially in older age. Despite,

freedom of movement and open borders as well as geographical proximity and regular visits over time, these women decide not to return to Ireland. On the surface, their reasoning is informed by reciprocal caring relations, especially with children and grandchildren in Britain. However, applying the embedding framework, we dig deeper to analyse other underlying explanations. Our analysis reveals more nuanced and complex motivations for non-return among older women. With this work, we also seek to further advance the embedding framework through the life course lens.

UNDERSTANDING NON-RETURN THROUGH THE EMBEDDING FRAMEWORK

We apply the conceptual framework of embedding to make sense of migrants' complex, dynamic and multidimensional processes of belonging and attachments in particular places over time (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015).

While influenced by Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness, through longitudinal research with migrants over many years Mulholland and Ryan (2023) observed processes that were dynamic and even reversible over time. Indeed, it should not be assumed that migrants will simply become embedded or integrated into the destination society eventually. These observations echo growing criticisms of existing frameworks, such as integration (Spencer & Charsley, 2021).

To understand dynamic and differentiated experiences, the term 'embedding' was coined (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015). Rather than a single measure of attachment or belonging, migrants are negotiating embedding across multiple sectors simultaneously, e.g. civic and institutional settings, labour market, welfare regimes, educational settings, neighbourhoods, friendship and familial networks, etc. For example, it is possible for a migrant to experience deep relational embedding through personal networks, while simultaneously experiencing shallow economic embedding through precarious employment.

Therefore, in migration research, embedding is defined as: 'dynamic and contingent social practices through which migrants develop, maintain or withdraw relations and attachments both in and across time and space' (Mulholland & Ryan, 2023: 605). Rather than a static, achieved state, embedding is inherently processual. Moreover, embedding is understood as multispeed, multidepth and multidirectional. Despite effortful and agentic dimensions, embedding is contingent upon specific contextual factors. There may be obstacles across various domains (e.g. economic or institutional barriers) that hinder embedding. Hence, migrants may experience differentiated embedding, or indeed disembedding, in particular aspects of their lives over time, e.g. employment, housing, local networks and transnational connections.

The dynamism of embedding, as an effortful and contingent process, over time, complicates a simplistic notion of linear embeddedness. For example, economic embedding may be reserved when a person retires; moreover, relational embedding may be reversed, (disembedding), through bereavement as social ties diminish and networks shrink in later life. Thus, a life course lens is especially pertinent to understanding how key life events, such as retirement, bereavement of significant others or failing health, may shape embedding.

The transnational lens is also relevant to understanding embedding in long-distance connections between people and places in origin and destination societies (Ryan, 2023). Hence, as discussed throughout this paper, the differentiated and dynamic nature of embedding, including disembedding, is relevant for understanding migrants' sense of belonging and attachment back to the origin society through the ageing process (Ryan et al., 2021).

While most applications of the embedding framework, to date, by its originators and those who have adopted the concept, focus on the destination country, there is a recent discussion about how it might be applied in the case of return to the origin country (see Grabowska & Ryan, 2024).

In this paper, we now apply embedding to the case of non-return. We explore how various dimensions of differentiated embedding, over time, may frame decisions about not returning to live in Ireland. In so doing, we seek to advance understanding of the sustained effort required to maintain embedding in the origin country and how opportunities, but also motivations, to do so may wax and wane through the life course.

THE STUDY

Our 3-year qualitative project aimed to relate the hitherto untold stories of Irish migrant nurses in Britain's National Health Service (NHS). Following its establishment in 1948, and given the urgent need to rapidly expand the number of nurses, the NHS initiated a campaign to recruit tens of thousands of young Irish women as trainee nurses. Advertisements were placed in national and provincial newspapers and recruitment officers travelled to every town in Ireland to interview candidates. At a time when nurse training opportunities in Ireland were very limited and extremely expensive, the chance to train for free, and to benefit from live-in accommodation, in British hospitals proved highly attractive (Ryan, 2007). As a result, by 1971 there were 31,000 Irish-born nurses in Britain constituting 12% of all nursing staff (Daniels, 1993: 5–6).

Between February 2022 and April 2023, we interviewed 45[1] participants across Britain – including London, Liverpool and Leeds, as well as Wales and Scotland. Most participants were aged over 75 with several in their late 80s and early 90s and had migrated mostly during the 1950s and 1960s, one arrived in 1948, and a few arrived in the early 1970s. Participants were recruited through the cooperation of Irish cultural and community organizations.[2] We adopted a whole Ireland approach, with participants from all 32 counties across the Republic and Northern Ireland.

We used biographical methods to encourage participants to tell their stories in their own words. The questions followed a loose topic guide and chronological order. We used thematic analysis to code the transcribed interviews using NVIVO. Codes were informed by our initial aims, the migration literature and also inductively by themes emerging from the data. Participants are anonymized with culturally appropriate pseudonyms. The project has received ethical approval from London Metropolitan University and is guided by Oral History Society Research protocols. In the following sections, we explore our data on non-return post-retirement through the embedding framework and a life course lens.

NO PLANS TO RETURN

As noted in the opening quotes of the paper, although many participants initially thought that they would return, after retirement and as they got older, they ruled out returning to Ireland. Decisions about non-return were usually articulated through local ties to children and grandchildren.

Mairead: 'No way, no, my children are here, my husband's here'.
Miriam: 'No. I've got my children, married here, I've got grandchildren who I adore so, no'.
Deborah: 'No... my sons were all married. I was looking after grandchildren'.
Kathleen: 'now I wouldn't... my son has a daughter, my granddaughter who's 13, so I couldn't go, I just couldn't go back'.

As well as children and grandchildren, having an English partner was another reason for non-return. Una explained her decision not to return to Ireland: 'because I married an Englishman and he was very English'. Similarly, Aine stated: 'I wanted to go back all the time really'. However, because of her English husband, she explained that she did not really push the issue. Now widowed, she could go back but she feels it is too late to return: 'I just kept putting it off probably, that's more like it, as you do'. Nonetheless, beyond any straightforward typologies, we note that having an English partner was not a clear pattern on return aspirations. Fidelma told us that her English-born husband was keen to retire to Ireland: 'I think my husband would probably go to live in Ireland quicker than I would, which is a strange'.

While many participants were emphatic about non-return, some were more ambivalent. As Julia explained: 'I couldn't leave the girls. They're both married and living here, and I have two granddaughters so I couldn't leave them. I would go home tomorrow, but I couldn't leave the girls'.

Similarly, Trisha stated:

> I would, but you see my husband, he was born here, and I've got the two children here. So, I'm kind of stuck. I'd be very happy in Ireland I'll be very honest with you, but then again I suppose the reality, is it dreams?

Trisha's use of the word 'dreams' is noteworthy and chimes with observations from the wider literature. As Ganga (2006) noted in research with older Italian migrants, while some people may wish to return, they are concerned that it may not live up to their dreams and so they are wary of what she terms a 'false return'. Nonetheless, despite these concerns, a few participants had actually tried to return permanently to Ireland.

ATTEMPTED RETURN/ATTEMPTED RE-EMBEDDING

Delia moved to London in 1961 with her sister and trained as a nurse. Unlike most participants who married and became mothers in their 20s, Delia had her only daughter, as a single mother, later in life. In the early 1980s, her father died, leaving her unmarried brother, who had a disability, living alone in the family home in the north of Ireland. Delia then embarked upon an extensive period of back-and-forth mobility including extended visits during which her daughter attended a local school in Ireland. By then, because of a back injury, which she described as a typical 'nurse's problem', Delia was unable to continue her career in the NHS. During periods back in Britain, especially when her daughter was attending university, Delia did agency work. After her daughter graduated, Delia moved back to live in Ireland 'permanently' in 2010. However, 10 years later, in 2020, she returned to Britain to live near her daughter in the south-west of England. In the interview, Delia explained that her daughter, a teacher with two young children, needed help with childcare. However, during our conversations, including a lengthy telephone chat to arrange our interview meeting, it was apparent that Delia was in poor health. So, it is possible that the daughter wanted her mother close by so she could care for her.

As discussed in a later section, several participants expressed concern about future care needs: who would look after them in Ireland when they got old and frail? Adult children in the destination society may be perceived as a more reliable source of care than more distant relatives back in the origin country (Tezcan, 2019). For Delia this had become a reality and approaching 80 years of age, she re-migrated to Britain to live near her daughter.

Delia's story was unusual. She appeared to be living a transnational lifestyle before the phrase had been coined in migration research. Unlike other participants who had careers, partners and children that required, and indeed facilitated, embedding in specific, local places, she was very mobile. However, she was not our only participant who returned to Ireland following retirement. Ruth retired to Ireland but later also returned to Britain.

Ruth left Ireland in 1968, aged 18, to train as a nurse in the south of England. She enjoyed a long career in nursing. She married an Irish man, met in England, and had two children. She retired aged 62. In expectation of post-retirement return, she and her husband had already bought a house in Ireland.

> Yes, we actually bought a bungalow in Ireland. He always wanted to go back to Ireland, and he went on and on…we bought this beautiful bungalow and it sits on an acre of land, it's beautiful. I just couldn't settle there. And then a year after we bought the bungalow my mother died, and it just lost…there was something not quite right about it. I never really settled there, and we sold it and came back.
>
> (Ruth)

In this quote, Ruth suggests that her husband was the main driver of their return to Ireland. He was much keener to return than she and this reflects wider patterns in the literature where men, more than women, wish to return

(Hunter, 2023; Tezcan, 2019; Zontini, 2015). Ruth repeatedly emphasizes that the location and house were 'beautiful'. Nevertheless, she could not settle. Her relational ties in Ireland were sparse, hence her embedding there can be described as partial, which became apparent following the loss of her mother: 'Nobody knew who I was, and I didn't know anybody. It was really bizarre going back when people don't remember you and think, you know, 'who are you?'... and I thought, 'I just don't belong here anymore'' (Ruth).

Luckily, they had not sold their house in England so they could return. Ruth emphasized that she could not sell that house, which perhaps suggests that she had wanted to keep her options open to enable a possible return to England.

> so we had a house to come back to. I couldn't let go of it... I've brought my children up here, I've got too many memories and I've worked here. I just loved it and I loved the house, and I loved the friends and I couldn't leave them all.
>
> (Ruth)

The contrast between her lack of embedding in Ireland – where nobody knew her – and deep embedding in her local town in England - with her much-loved friends and children – is stark.

Beyond the 'myth of return' (Anwar, 1979), it is necessary to acknowledge that some migrants do successfully return and resettle into Irish society (Ní Laoire, 2008). Researching younger migrants who returned to Ireland, Ni Laoire argues that life course transitions are important in understanding not only why people return but also how they settle back into Irish society. For example, she found that wanting to be closer to ageing parents is often a motivation to return to Ireland and settle into family networks. Moreover, as the Irish economy improved, there were also incentives for economically active migrants to return and settle into the labour market in Ireland.

A life course lens is equally relevant to our analysis of non-return. As they reach older age, and their parents have passed away, our participants' closest kinship ties are to children and grandchildren in Britain. Moreover, as retired people, they were not incentivized by economic re-embedding into the Irish labour market. Hence, their lack of motivations and opportunities to return and re-embed into Irish society are shaped by their life course transitions as older, retirees.

Clearly, our sample is skewed because we only interviewed nurses who were still living in Britain. Nonetheless, as noted elsewhere drawing on other studies (Ryan, 2023), it is remarkable that migrants who return to their origin countries in their 60s following retirement, re-migrate again because they could not settle, as in the case of Ruth, or because, like Delia, as they enter older age they needed care from adult children in Britain. These examples illustrate that post-retirement 'return' cannot be assumed to be a permanent, one-off event (Walsh & Näre, 2016).

LIFE COURSE CHANGES AND CHALLENGES OF MAINTAINING EMBEDDING IN IRELAND

As noted by Elder (1994), the life course lens not only focuses on how people are changing through biographical time but also how their socio-structural contexts are changing through historical time (Ryan et al., 2021). These changes also occur in the origin country. Many remarked that Ireland had changed almost beyond recognition over the last 50 years, usually for the better. Mairead, despite frequent visits, remarked: 'the only way to describe it is culture shock actually when I go back'. Fidelma observed how Ireland had transformed:

> I mean it's lovely, it's fantastic to see, but we've seen it like obviously in the 50s and, I mean, I remember when they got the electric lighting [laughs]. I can remember candles and oil lamps. And the grandchildren look at me now. 'Are you as old as the dinosaurs Nana'... But I think it's lost a little bit of its friendliness.

Sisters Aoife and Una were interviewed together and explained how Ireland has changed through the years:

> since Ireland joined the EU, things have got a lot better... Ireland I think has progressed massively in the last 20 years. Economically and everything... Ireland did very well and the Irish people would say that. Oh yes, they built their roads and everything from the EU and it's much easier to go there, I think.

While Ireland has changed, many participants noted that they have also changed over time.

> I had my early years there with nice memories, but it is another time and it's so far removed from the person I've become ... I just feel now that all of my adult life and living and life experiences have been here. My familiarity in everybody is here, really.
>
> (Jacky)

As noted elsewhere in the literature, ties to home are more about kinship than about nationhood per se (Lam & Yeoh, 2004: 152). Most of our participants had very regular contact with kin in Ireland but their embedding in the wider nation-state was often quite shallow. This became particularly apparent when they discussed specific Irish structures and institutions such as Health Care which many professed not to understand, as recounted later. Thus, as Fidelma stated, it was easy to lose touch and feel disconnected from wider events in Ireland beyond the intimate circle of family news and events. This observation illustrates differentiated embedding in Ireland: deep relational embedding in inter-personal networks but shallow embedding, feeling out of touch, with wider Irish society. However, relational embedding in kinships networks cannot be taken for granted and may also weaken with time.

The processual, dynamic and differentiated qualities of embedding help to analyse the ebb and flow of ties 'here' and 'there' (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015). Moreover, a life course lens is useful to explore how social ties change through the ageing process. For example, bereavement may lead to network shrinkage and provoke a sense of relational dis-embedding, as shown by Ruth, above, following the death of her mother.

Bridget migrated as a teenager to train as a nurse in London in 1952. Now aged 89, she reflected that she had out-lived all her siblings and this was a factor in her decision not to return to live in Ireland post-retirement. 'No, I had no – my sisters were all gone, my brother died... they were all dead'.

Interestingly, we observed that several participants had adult children who had moved to Ireland, for example, for work reasons as the Irish economy grew significantly. Aine, who migrated to Liverpool in 1968, has a son working in Dublin: 'Well my youngest is in Dublin, he works over there, he's been there 12 years and he likes it. I don't think he'll come back, he's got a girlfriend'. Similarly, Nessa who migrated to Leeds in 1957, also has a son who moved to Ireland. Nonetheless, both women explained that their relational embedding was deeper in their current city. As Nessa put it:

> If you went back to retire to Ireland, there was nobody there now that you would know. All the ones you grew up with have left or passed on. I knew more people and I felt more at home here. I have more friends here than I would have over there.

Another important dimension of embedding is effort (Mulholland & Ryan, 2023). Forming and maintaining attachments in particular places over time requires sustained effort. Several stated that it would be hard to go back and re-settle into Irish society after so many decades away. As noted by Aisling at the start of this paper: 'you would never pick up the thread from where you left off'.

Despite advances in communication technology, several participants stated that it was hard to keep up with people and events in Ireland. Fidelma arrived in Bedfordshire in 1966 aged 18, and remained in that location for the next five decades and is now aged mid-70s. She maintained a strong sense of Irish identity

and is proud that her children play traditional Irish music. In fact, the interview had to be arranged around the schedule of various musical events where her sons were performing. She 'loves' to visit Ireland but emphasized the effort required to keep in touch. She maintains weekly communication with relatives in Ireland: 'Oh yes, speak to my brothers every week, my sister, yeah, yeah, and my cousins. We're very close'. Despite such regular communication she noted, 'but then you kind of, you get out of touch and obviously people move on as well... you're not always up to speed with what's gone on'. She emphasized: 'That's why I always think contact is important, because you can lose it very easy, very, very easy, lose contact'. As Baldassar et al. (2007) observed, prolonged physical separation can mean that migrants feel excluded from their relative's shared memories and experiences.

Nonetheless, despite this level of effort to maintain contact, and her enduring love of Ireland, Fidelma could not envisage returning permanently: 'I'd find it difficult to go back to make new friends, because a lot of the friends that I would have, that generation's not there anymore, and the younger generation don't really know us,' it could be 'lonely' (Fidelma).

Fears of being lonely back in the origin country have been discussed elsewhere (Bolzman & Bridji, 2019: 30). Despite maintaining ties to siblings in the origin country, there is a perception that return would mean exerting considerable effort to build new friendship networks from scratch. Participants opined that they were too old to start making new friends. This is noteworthy because it suggests that migrants are aware of disembedding from relational networks in Ireland over time. While they may have made an effort to maintain ties to siblings, through regular communication, ties to former friends may have been lost. Moreover, ageing and bereavement are especially salient and several participants, as Ruth quoted earlier, stated that their ties to Ireland felt 'different' after the death of their parents.

CARING ROLES – HERE AND THERE – NEGOTIATIONS OVER TIME

Differentiated embedding is sensitive not only to temporality (dynamism over time) but also spatiality (attachments in particular places) (Grabowska & Ryan, 2024). Social ties not only connect one to places emotionally, but also may require physical co-presence in particular locations. This is especially apparent in relation to hands-on care (Baldassar et al., 2007). As noted in the migration literature (Buffel, 2017; Hunter, 2023), advancing age and concerns about access to healthcare can shape decisions about return and non-return.

It is noteworthy, that many participants had spent extended periods in Ireland looking after sick relatives. Ciara retired aged 64 to spend time caring for her mother in Ireland: 'my mum was beginning to get much frailer... So I was home most of the time until she died'. However, since her mother died, Ciara noted that she visited Ireland less frequently. She observed that 'it's different' now her mother is no longer there.

Sheila migrated to London in 1961 to commence nurse training. Now retired, she had also spent time in Ireland recently, caring for her unmarried brother. Periods of caring in Ireland often brought these migrants into encounters with Irish health care systems.

> I don't understand the Irish health system, I can't cope with all these different insurances... I think the National Health Service has spoiled everybody in this country really. It's been taken for granted... in Ireland, there's different types of insurance and even picking up prescriptions for my brother – 'Are you paying for this? It's €100'.
>
> (Sheila)

Return visits can provoke comparisons of services and lifestyles 'here' and 'there' (Tezcan, 2019). As retired healthcare professionals, our participants had strong views about Britain's NHS. For example, Ciara opined: 'I mean while the health system here isn't great, as you see in the media... But Ireland seems to be very difficult'.

Like Sheila, above, many professed a lack of understanding of Ireland's voluntary health insurance (VHI). Some stated that the health care provision was a reason not to return to Ireland in older age.

> because the NHS is here if you get ill and things like that, I think it's a good system... over in Ireland I don't feel that it's as easy, that would be my big thing .... they have this VHI and there's different levels of it and people are paying different things... I just find it complex.
>
> (Aoife)

In addition to concerns about health care provision in Ireland, these older, retired migrants often felt torn between caring priorities for transnational relatives. Kathleen (who migrated in 1968), also spent extended periods of time in Ireland, especially since her retirement, caring for her brother. However, her presence was required not only in Ireland but also back in Liverpool where her daughter was experiencing some health issues.

> I did go to stay with my brother for six, nine months... while he was ill and my daughter said, 'Mum, you can't stay in Ireland, you must come home'. So, I was torn, really torn, I did stay with my brother as long as he needed me...
>
> (Kathleen)

Thus, social ties may compete in ways that cause migrants to feel 'torn' between obligations and loyalties here and there. Although their children were adult and, in some cases, middle-aged, participants seemed very sensitive to their needs. Research in Australia, which included Irish and Italian migrants, found strong gender patterns as women were expected to return home to provide hands-on care, especially for aged parents, while there were fewer demands placed upon male migrants (Baldassar et al., 2007). Similarly, research with older Spanish and Turkish migrants also found strongly gendered expectations around care provision (Bocker & Gehring, 2015). Moreover, as nurses, many of our participants felt a need to return to Ireland for extended periods to provide care. However, the life course lens is relevant here. When recently retired and still relatively young, these nurses were able to visit Ireland regularly to provide care, but upon entering older age, especially over 80, their visits reduced and their attention turned to their own care needs. For example, we interviewed Caitriona on her 85th birthday and she explained that, following retirement, she had considered moving back to Ireland: 'we went back over to a wedding and if I could have found a house then in Ireland, I would have stayed'. But now, she is glad that she did not return: 'you've got to think as you're getting older, there's nobody there whereas I know a lot of people in Manchester'.

Nonetheless, non-return to one's origin country may be perceived as disloyalty to the homeland (Lam & Yeoh, 2004) or even 'failure' of the migration project (Leavey et al., 2004; Tezcan, 2019). Hence, we need to be mindful of how migrants articulate their motivations. As Gray (2004) observed, some migrant narratives are more easily articulated than others. Constable (1999) found that some Filipino women were reluctant to return home, despite hard work and experiences of discrimination as domestic workers in Hong Kong. However, they felt disloyal to their families by admitting that they enjoyed the relative autonomy of living in Hong Kong. Therefore, it was easier to justify their non-return through financial rather than personal motivations. Most told relatives that they needed to prolong their migration to send money to the Philippines.

Our participants may be navigating similar feelings of disloyalty by choosing not to return to Ireland. Indeed, many emphasized how much they 'adored' and 'loved' Ireland. As Angela stated: 'I've no desire to return to Ireland at all ... I mean I love Ireland, don't get me wrong, but ...' Similarly, Linda while professing no plan to return to Ireland, declared how much she loved visiting: 'I love going home, I love it'.

Therefore, while proclaiming enduring love for Ireland, concerns about the complex health insurance schemes and the need to stay close to children and grandchildren seem to provide clear and comfortable justifications for non-return post-retirement. That is not to suggest that their reasoning is disingenuous, but rather that it may be easier, and more comfortable, to articulate some rather than other potential reasons.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to studies at the nexus of ageing and migration research (Torres & Hunter, 2023) by focusing on those who decide to remain in the destination country in older age. In so doing, drawing upon the embedding framework, we add new insights into transnational practices through the life course.

Drawing upon rich, qualitative interviews with older Irish women migrants, we explore why, despite geographical proximity, open borders, frequent visits and possibilities to return, they either do not do so or tried to return but came back to live in Britain. Using a life course lens, we argue that age matters: our participants can be described as 'old-old' with many aged over 80 years. Concerns about health and care needs were common in interviews. Moreover, the migration literature suggests that women are less inclined to return to their origin country than their male counterparts. Our focus on older women migrants allows us to explore various reasons for their expressed desire not to return.

On the surface, while asserting their enduring love of Ireland, most gave the simple reason of not wanting to leave their children and grandchildren in Britain. This chimes with other researchers (see Bocker & Gehring, 2015) who have noted that women explained their decision to remain in the host country through their ties to children and grandchildren. Nonetheless, as noted elsewhere in the literature, deciding not to return to one's origin country may appear disloyal or even as a failure of the migration project (Lam & Yeoh, 2004). Therefore, it is necessary to consider what justifications may seem more comfortable to participants. Asserting their desire to remain with children and grandchildren can hardly be questioned or criticized. Nonetheless, in this paper, using the conceptual framework of embedding, we consider other possible reasons why participants may decide not to return in older age.

After more than 50 years in Britain, it is apparent that most participants had been gradually embedded in networks of kinship and friendship ties in their local neighbourhoods. By contrast, most had been dis-embedding gradually from relational ties in Ireland; older relatives had passed away and younger relatives simply did not know them anymore. Moreover, many noted that Ireland had changed significantly over the decades, usually for the better, but also losing some familiar characteristics – e.g. becoming less friendly and welcoming. As a result, despite regular visits, several participants remarked that they no longer belonged in Ireland. Indeed, their frequent trips to Ireland often underlined the extent of their dis-embedding.

As noted, age matters, whilst in their 60s, post-retirement, many had visited Ireland regularly, including to provide care for parents and sick siblings. However, as they entered older age concerns about declining health, mobility and care needs became considerations shaping return decisions. We show how particular social ties are evaluated and prioritized in relation to each other in terms of future care needs. Siblings, who were themselves also in advanced older age, could not be expected to provide care to return migrants. By contrast, children and grandchildren in Britain may be perceived as more reliable sources of care in the near future. Moreover, concerns about the Irish health care system, also suggest how migrants are disembedding from structures and institutions in the origin country that they no longer know how to navigate.

This paper also has sought to advance the embedding framework by adding a life course lens. Embedding requires effort but also opportunities. Embedding in new places, relationships and systems may be easier at particular life course stages, such as when one is active in the labour market, regularly interacting with colleagues, or when one has school-age children, engaging in child-based sociality and meeting other parents. In older age, especially post-retirement, re-embedding in a former location may be more difficult as previous attachments may have dwindled and there are fewer opportunities to forge new relationships. Thus, we demonstrate that paying attention to the life course highlights how opportunities for new embedding, or re-embedding in former locations, reduce over time, especially in advanced older age.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that these women were not nostalgic about Ireland. Growing up in the 1940s–50s, when Ireland was very poor and under-developed, there had been little money and limited prospects for young women (Ryan, 2007). Hence, unlike other migrants (Miah & King, 2018), they did not romanticize Ireland of the past.

Ultimately, there is no contradiction between feeling a strong connection with the origin country as 'home', and a strong bond with cultural/ national identity, but still feeling no desire to return to live there (Lam & Yeoh, 2004).

Thus, our paper contributes to understanding the multidimensionality, nuances and dynamism of inter-personal relationships both temporally and spatially. Most participants had deep kinship and friendship ties in Britain, formed over many decades, that they knew would be hard to replicate elsewhere. As older, retired people, participants were aware that returning to Ireland would mean an active process of re-embedding, in-cluding accessing new friendship networks. Moreover, many appreciated that making new friends was far from automatic and would require considerable time and effort and ultimately may not be possible – they could 'never pick up the threads'. This realization reinforced concerns that return could be a lonely and isolating experience in a society they no longer belonged to or fully understood. We argue that such feelings may pro-voke a sense of loss that can be painful to articulate. Therefore we suggest, simply asserting that they want to stay close to their children and grandchildren in Britain can be a more comfortable and more easily articulated reason for non-return.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the highly personal and confidential nature of our data it is currently not available, but we hope to make anonymised versions of the transcripts available in the coming years.

ENDNOTES

[1] The project Irish Nurses in the NHS: an oral history was led by Louise Ryan and Grainne McPolin. Neha Doshi was the research assistant. The project received funding from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (Irish Abroad Unit), The Burdett Trust for Nursing, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Association, the Liverpool Institute of Irish Studies and the London Irish Centre. A total of 45 interviews were undertaken by Louise and Grainne. Two participants were men. In this paper, we focus on the 43 women. A podcast series produced by Grainne McPolin is available: https://shows.acast.com/irish-nurses-in-the-nhs.

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