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Abstract

Associated with the success of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ireland has seen a rapid demographic shift from large scale emigration to immigration. For the first time Irish-born migrants comprised the majority of this immigration flow (Ní Laoire, 2008) but have received negligible attention from academic researchers. Significantly, many returnees have returned to the predominately rural counties along the west coast of Ireland which historically bore the largest numbers of emigrants. For the most part their return, which is commonly equated to a return 'home', does not recognise that it can never be exactly the "same" place to which they return. This article seeks to discuss return migration in Ireland using an ethnographic approach influenced by the mobilities turn in geography. In particular, life story interviews will be discussed and reflections on the 'doing' of life-story interviews opens up space for reflections about this methodology as a way in which the structural openness of migrants' lives can be accommodated.

Keywords: return migration, mobility, life stories and Ireland

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1.0 Introduction

Ireland is one of the few European countries whose national story has been very closely linked with the issues of migration (Gray, 2003; Hickman, 2002). The fluidity and movement of people in Ireland can be seen as defining features of the 'Diaspora nation' (Feldman, 2006) and the country's collective memory is underpinned by the trauma, loss and opportunities brought about through different waves of migrations (Gray, 2002; 2004). More recently, the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom (from approximately 1995 until the recession in 2008) provided another notable wave but for very different reasons than the large scale emigrations of the mid-19th century, 1950s and 1980s. The 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom brought about a dramatic rise in wealth and prosperity and Ireland became, for the first time, a host country receiving large numbers of both non-national immigrants and Irish returning migrants. The Irish-born returned migrants comprised the majority of this immigration flow up until 1999 (Ní Laoire, 2007; Central Statistics Office 2010).

A recent taskforce study[1] into migration trends in Ireland noted that the 1970s were generally a period of net inward migration as was the more recent 1996 - 2001 period (Walter, 2002). However, compiling accurate statistical data about return migrants remains elusive due to the deficiencies and discrepancies

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[1] Taskforce Study entitled: 'A study of the existing sources of information and analysis about Irish emigrants and Irish communities abroad'

regarding the definition of both 'return' and nation states. It is impossible to accurately record or ascertain these numbers. For example, in a recent report by Farrell et al. (2007) they estimate that from 1996 to 2006 between 23% and 50% of inward net immigration to Ireland was compiled of Irish returnees. Furthermore, Ní Laoire (2007, p. 333) proposed a figure of 221,000 Irish born migrants returned during 1996-2005 period, numbers that seem even more significant considering that the population of Ireland stands at approximately 4 million (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

That being said, this research builds upon the influence of the mobilities literature to discuss return migration as a complex and temporal phenomenon. Following Stefansson and Markowitz (2004), the return of Irish-born migrants has come to be understood as a complex experience involving surprise, shock, ambivalence, rupture and disillusionment. Recent studies of return migration are more aware of the complexities involved in return migration, highlighting the multiple types of return such as extended visits, annual return holidays, as well as emotional and imagined returns. This study has been influenced by the mobilities turn (Adey, 2009; Cresswell, 2006) which has helped to re-think return migration as something non-permanent and multiple. Furthermore these studies are employing novel 'mobile' methods to reveal these complexities and uncertainties.

2.0 Research Questions and the "Mobility Turn"

The overall aim of the research reported in this article is to explore the Irish return migration experience through the lens of movement, and the related effect this has on attachments to different places and people across multiple spatial scales and periods of time. It examines mobility, materiality, belonging and identity as significant facets involved in the movement of a group of Irish returned migrants to the predominately western rural communities in Ireland. Whilst acknowledging that at any one time in Ireland there exists a "wide variety of times and places" (Keohane & Kuhling, 2004, p. 7), I explore the links returning Irish migrants make to these times and places, the temporality and the scale and form of these connections, issues that have, to date, not been addressed fully in Irish return migration research.

The 'mobilities turn' has opened up the space between sedentary and nomadic understandings of mobility to critically assess the complexity and multiplicity of ways in which people are 'on the move' (Cresswell, 2006). Thus, there is no complete rejection of places, anchors, and roots nor is there an over-valuation placed upon one particular location. This can be neatly encapsulated through the words of one return migrant; *"You can go home. But you can't start from where you left. To fit in, you have to create another place in that place you left behind,"* (Stefansson & Markowitz, 2004, p. 12). These many complexities and ambiguities require an appreciation of flexible research methods sympathetic to exploring tangible and less tangible aspects of return. This research firmly seeks to explore experiences surrounding return migration, in particular, personal feelings, emotions and memories. The nature of my research demands a more fluid and open methodological framework such as that offered by the use of a combination of qualitative research methods which I hope to address in this article. In particular this article will deliberate over the specific methodological approaches adopted in this research.

3.0 Return Migration

Return migration for a long time was considered to be the "…great unwritten article in the history of migration" (King, 2000:7). Mac Éinrí and White (2008, p. 160) have stated that "...given the scale of these [return] movements and [the] number of people involved it is amazing how little attention these migrants have been afforded by researchers." Return migration in Ireland is, however, not a new phenomenon. Fitzgerald and Lambkin (2008) have identified return movements for the early 17th century, the early 19th century and the 1970s. Even during periods of extensive outward emigration such as in the 1950s and 1980s return migration was also common.

During the 1970s, return migration began to be more systematically studied with King and Christou (2011), who formulated a broad typology of return migrants. The literature about return migrants largely assumes that the reasons for return are predominately economic. Two dominant reasons are given for returning to Ireland: financial failure or financial success. In Ireland, the Celtic Tiger boom afforded many returnees the opportunity to return home but Ni Laoire (2007) noted the paradox that whilst the Celtic Tiger presented the opportunity for some people to return they were often disappointed with the perceived heightened modernization of Ireland and the societal changes associated with the economic turnaround. Early investigations conceived return migration in simple terms and focused on first generation returnees, those who had emigrated abroad and returned to their place of birth in Ireland. King's (2000) typology defines economic reasons as one of four major categories that characterise why migrants make the decision to return: the remaining 3 categories being family, social and political reasons.

The edited collection 'Contemporary Irish Migration' (King, 1991) highlighted several themes including the economic, cultural and social impacts of return migrants to a small island off the west coast of Co. Mayo in the later 1980s (McGrath, 1991). Thus nuanced interpretations were given as the causes for return migration to Ireland. Prior to this collection, McGrath identified previous literature consisting of only two Master theses and a handful of papers (1991, p. 55). Using a life-history approach McGrath interviewed 142 migrants who had returned to the island. A systematic survey was used to elicit their experiences. Her findings suggested that whilst many emigrants left for economic and employment related reasons their decisions to return were motivated by more personal and family reasons. These findings have correlated more recently with Caitriona Ni Laoire's (2008) research, who has used a life story approach to explore oral testimonies from migrants 'settling back' into Ireland. Ni Laoire (2007; 2008) has significantly addressed return to Ireland from a particular group who left in the 1980s. Her research is significant for portraying a qualitative in-depth picture of return migrants in Ireland. She uncovered an often uneasy tension between the local population in destination communities and the returning Irish. For return migrants, coming back home was accompanied by the feeling of being both insiders and outsiders. Thus, the return journey was characterised by both a feeling of belonging and non-belonging in Ireland.

4.0 Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher undertaking mobile research inevitably must move her/himself. However, the mobility of the researcher is hardly ever mentioned or only briefly made note of in the writing up stages (D'Andrea et al., 2011). For my own study I temporarily relocated to the south-west coast of Ireland to my extended family's home in Duagh, Co. Kerry for a total period of 6 months (2 months over

July and August 2010, 2 months over October and November in 2010, 2 months in April and May 2011). In total 45 participants have been interviewed for this study ranging from County Sligo in the North-west to Co. Waterford in the south (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Map of Ireland showing selected locations of interviews held in each county.
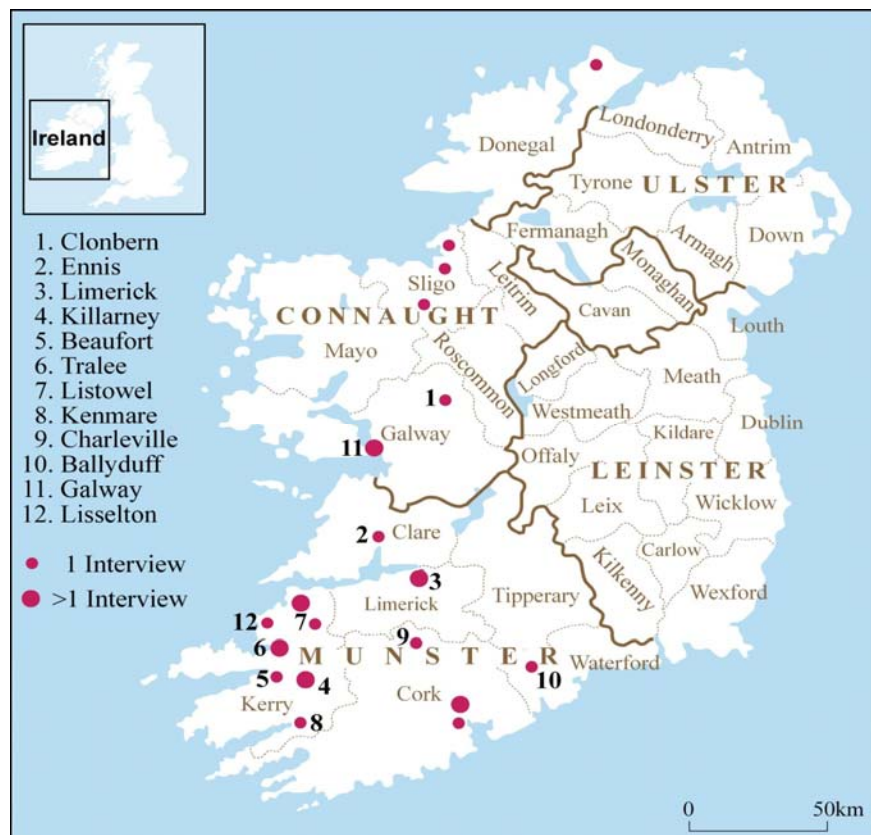
From a personal and academic perspective I wanted to focus upon the Irish experience of return migration. Being half-Irish myself instigated the research from a very personal perspective. Returning every summer to my mother's extended family in North Kerry from an early age has meant that I have similar experiences to many Irish migrants making the return visits back 'home' whilst based more permanently elsewhere. In my extended family, there have been both historical and recent instances of emigration and return. Moreover, in the local surroundings of my family's farm in North Kerry there was always talk of someone leaving or returning (more often leaving). In addition, there were curious nicknames for certain neighbours; 'the returned Yank', 'the Yanks', 'the Aussie' which instigated this curiosity further. These reflections did shape the research process, from the initial stages of the research design and throughout the interview process with participants. Growing up listening to stories and songs of emigration did inspire my methodological choices. I was aware that, in general, Irish people like to talk and share stories particularly if there is an audience.

From a scholarly point of view the choice of Ireland, and in particular the west of Ireland, led on from my personal associations. I knew that there were a diverse range of experiences of return to the west coast. Kockel (1991) noted that

migration research carried out in the west of Ireland concentrated upon large-scale emigrations and neglected immigration to this area, including return. Whilst quantitatively he argues the numbers may pail in significance to emigration, the study of immigration, including return migrants, has a lot to offer qualitatively (Kockel 1991, p. 70). Moreover, mobility and Ireland for the most part appear to go hand in hand, including emigration whether forced or voluntary, immigration from non-Irish, return migration, return visits by expatriates, tourists and the widespread Irish Diaspora. Popular opinion during the 'Celtic Tiger' period, which saw unprecedented levels of Irish returning to Ireland, was that these migrants were returning for economic reasons (and similarly that they had left for economic reasons too). As Irish citizens their return to Ireland was seen to involve an easy assimilation process and it was remarked upon in the cities of Dublin on the east coast, and Cork and Limerick on the west. Outside of these industrial centres, however, little was 'formally' known about return to more rural areas in counties once considered 'employment black-spots'. In order to understand return migrants as something other than economic migrants, I specifically chose so called 'employment black-spots' of the west to situate my research. Furthermore, the western counties of Ireland were known to have borne some of the biggest emigrations during the Great Famine, the 1950s and 1980s. Once more, examining return migration in an area so closely associated with the legacy of emigration provided another opportunity to challenge this dominant narrative.

5.0 Mobility and Migration

The lack of acknowledgement of the returning migrants' ability to transform and have an influence upon Irish contemporary society feeds into the assumption that a returning migrant should easily assimilate back into everyday life in Ireland since nothing has changed. In this sense, upon arrival back to Ireland, returning migrants are back 'where they belong' and back 'in their place'. This perspective can be attributed to a sedentary understanding of mobility. However, Stefansson and Markowitz (2004, p. 8) suggest that "…coming home can be more difficult and emotionally destabilising than leaving home and settling in a new part of the world". This sentiment can be attributed to long established ideas about how migration (in particular long distance migration) has come to be conceptualised and defined. Thus opposing views of fixity and migrants' mobility are creating new geographies of belonging and exclusion (Gilmartin & White, 2008).

Perhaps the simplest conception of migration consists of a physical relocation between departures and arrivals. However, migratory movement does not simply concern the physical act of moving, but also a symbolic and imagined movement spanning different geographical locations across multiple timescales. To think of migration as a "play between memory, identity, movement and landscape," (Solnit, 1997) can help migration to be understood as something more than a one dimensional move. John Urry (2007) summarises five main conceptions of mobility involved in social life; communicative travel, corporeal travel, virtual travel, imaginative travel and physical movement: mobility thus pervades many aspects of everyday life. Research that seeks to explore these many mobilities requires a flexible methodological approach, best suited to qualitative methods.

6.0 Methodological Implications

There is now widespread agreement that migration itself is more than a change of address. For example, Halfacree and Boyle (1993, p. 334) call for "an alternative conceptualization of migration which emphasizes its situatedness within everyday life". Traditionally, for human geographers, migration research

was located within population studies, which relied heavily upon a behaviourist conception of mobility. In other words, the migrants themselves weren't the object of attention, and instead the obvious differences between places were the determining factors for migration (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993). This is illustrated by push and pull factors espoused by Lee who built upon E.G. Ravenstein's 'laws' of migration, published in 1885, which involved a comparison of attributes at each destination. Migration was, in this sense, understood as a spatial science. For example, Jones (1990, p. 179) described migration as the "spatial reallocation of human resources". Put simply, migration was conceptualised as crossing a boundary and spending a certain length of time across that boundary in a new residence, i.e. a change of address (Johnston et al., 2000) . Following Lee, the population geographer Zelinsky (1971) developed the idea of a 'mobility transition' which related to the demographic transition model and proposed five principal types of migration – international, frontierward, rural to urban, urban to urban and intra-urban, and circulation. However, a migrant's personal motives and the everyday life within with the decisions were made were largely considered irrelevant in these models.

In the 1970s, geographers, including those studying topics such as migration, integrated qualitative ethnographic methods into their research as a reaction against the quantitative revolution and positivist spatial science. Thus, ethnographic approaches began to be streamlined and adopted for geographical research including migration studies. This turn reflects wider concerns within migration research between macro and micro approaches. The 'cultural turn' within the social sciences has contributed to the study of migration from a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down. In essence, qualitative ethnographic studies have come to emphasise the agencies and choices of individuals in migratory processes whilst macro studies still place emphasis upon wider structures such as the global economy or state politics. Within migration studies there lies a dichotomy between macro and micro approaches (Boyle et al., 1998). Determinist accounts largely neglect the role of the individual in the decision making process instead offering the view that migrants are responding to a wider situation. Whilst migration necessarily does not occur within a vacuum and is an outcome of certain wider structural influences, it is also necessarily a personal and individual act. Refocusing research into the everyday lives of the people that live them out can elicit both the global wider structurating forces and personal influences involved in migration decisions.

7.0 Mobility, the Cultural Turn and Ethnographic Approaches

Quantitative approaches do not allow for a detailed understanding of the ways in which mobility and migration transform and reconfigure a sense of belonging and perceptions of migration to be developed. Ethnographic methods, used within a mobilities perspective, can help overcome the limitation of a quantitative approach. Return migration from a mobilities perspective involves uncertainty and is complex. Ethnography's ability to uncover diversity, hybridity and the unexpected is thus well suited to research exploring return migration. Ethnography is usually centred on participant observation, with other methods, such as interviews and various visual interpretive approaches also being employed. New digital technologies have provided opportunities for novel data collection methods to be developed, including digital video recorders[2].

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[2] Participant-led video diaries were incorporated into the methodology for this research as well as a period of participant observation with a return holiday charity.

A key strength of ethnographic research is that the production of knowledge is a collaborative effort between the researcher and the participant(s) (Coffey, 1999). Thus any notion of a detached researcher is shattered. Some anthropologists are critical of qualitative methods such as life-story interviewing, arguing that these methods do not require the researcher to spend enough time in the field to really understand the phenomena under investigation. This reflects the tendency for many anthropologists to associate themselves as experts of a particular group of people in a particular locale (Gottlieb, 2012). I spent a total of six months in Ireland, comprising three blocks of field work. Taking on the role of the interviewer did require a new awareness of my own vocabulary and means of expressing myself; especially the need to explain academic terminology in simpler terms. A 'group' of sorts was identified for my study and my research was conducted in a particular area, the west of Ireland (See Figure 1). Although my research was primarily interview-based rather than an application of participant observation, the premises supporting ethnographic research remain applicable.

The ethnographic principle, as defined by Agar (1996, p. 9), involves the researcher learning something by collecting data, "then you try to make sense of it (analysis), then you go back and see if the interpretation makes sense in light of new experience (collect more data), then you refine your interpretation (more analysis) and so on." Thus the process of doing ethnography is iterative. My repeat visits to Ireland for fieldwork allowed an iterative approach, with return visits to participants and different data collection methods being used at different stages of the research. In a similar fashion, there are multiple and contradictory return migration experiences. Thus no two people are likely to experience migration in the same way. Exploring multiple in-depth accounts of return migration allows for a broader and more detailed understanding of return migration itself.

Previous ethnographic research in Ireland has tended to focus upon 'localities and communities' (Donnan & Wilson, 2006). Whilst a sense of belonging in Irish society might be more emphasised amongst institutions or groups rather than communities, a focus upon everyday lived experiences is still relevant as Ireland is seen as a society "constructed from below" (Wilson et al., 2006, p.167). By way of explanation, it is claimed that Irish society operates on a strongly 'informal' basis, whereby local knowledge and connections are valued criteria for getting by in day to day life. Thus, ethnographic researchers trying to understand values of certain social phenomena have to immerse themselves in this local environment. In terms of researching return migration, I was primarily based in a rural village in county Kerry close to where some of my participants were based. However, I was rarely in the village for more than a few days at a time in order to travel and meet with my participants up and down the west coast. This provides an interesting adage to using ethnographic principles from a mobilities perspective. Where traditionally ethnographic observations would be carried out in one particular place, in order to explore mobility and movement I became mobile. Thus had I remained in one location, I would not have been able to amass life stories from across the Irish western rural coast nor experience first-hand what being mobile in Ireland consists of.

8.0 Life Story Interviews

The data collection methods and analytical / interpretative techniques used in any research project tend to be dependent upon the actual aims of the research (Boyle et al., 1998). The overall aim of this research is to explore the personalised accounts of returning migrants to the west coast of Ireland during the last two decades. This explicitly calls for personal interaction between the

researcher and the research participants. Life-story interviews were identified as being the best method to explore a personalised and detailed account of return migration. Whilst in ethnography interviews are not necessarily the preferred method of gathering information, they are methodologically appealing for many qualitative geographers (and other social scientists) because they allow for a wide range of topics to be discussed. This section will discuss life-story interviewing: this method gathered most of the first-hand information used in my research and was the most intensive fieldwork method employed. Thinking about my own positionality and personal motivations behind the research encouraged the adoption of methods which could articulate other stories and experiences of Irishness and migration.

Linde (1993) notes the important linguistic differences between the life story and other biographical methods. She emphasises the creation of 'coherence' in the life story. As participants strive to make sense of their lives they almost distance themselves slightly from their story in order to reflexively impart meaning into what they have done. As a reflexive process, it naturally builds into creating a story which fits in with their current values and future prospects. In this way it guards against seeing a person's life as a series of random events or being unpredictable. The creation of the life story thus imparts the narrator with a level of control over how their life has turned out and why they did what they did.

Foucault and Rabinow (1991) described this process as one of 'subjectification' whereby the participant "turn themselves into subjects and actively initiate their own self-formation into meaningful selves" (Gray 2003, p. 3). Importantly for thinking about the impact of migration and return within a person's life, the discontinuities of framing personal experience within dominant socio-cultural understandings can exhibit a more nuanced reading of return migration in Ireland in general. Thus the life story allows the participant to link together their past, present and future. Nevertheless this creation of 'coherence' does not imply a continuous and linear pathway through the person's story. This separates the life story from more formal auto-biography and life history accounts which are usually framed by a chronological structure. Life-story interviewing and any in-depth interviews are appealing because they allow a wide range of topics to be discussed. The sheer depth and wide ranging information that arises from the interview provides ample means for the researcher to investigate the aims and research questions in great detail and variety.

9.0 Advantages and Disadvantages of the Life Story Approach

The life story was once perceived as the "unwanted step-child" in ethnographic research (Miles & Crush, 1993). Criticisms abounded that the life story method merely provided a "caricature" of a person's full life story (Miles & Crush, 1993). However, it would be nigh-on impossible to record and capture a person's entire life story. The life story is an oral account and both the content and the context of the narrative are important. Obtaining part of the life story elicited by the careful use of topic prompts by the interviewer is sufficient to indicate the nature of the open narrative so that the researcher does not have to resort to collecting the entire volume of a lifetime's worth of talk but only deal with a selection. A cross section of a life story, taken at a specific moment in time, contains a large enough number of narratives and their relations to permit us to study the creation of coherence (Linde, 1993). A significant advantage of sampling a cross section of a speaker's life story generates a manageable amount of data and also permits the researcher the opportunity to meet with a number of participants rather than just one for the purposes of their study. The life story

also importantly deals with only the topics and issues of interest to the research study and not the whole life history of the participant.

There are, however, downsides to the life story method which are important to reflect upon. As a reflexive method, the life story interview places a lot of emphasis upon the participant's ability to provide detailed information and to reflect upon their experiences. Furthermore, allowing the participant free-reign over the narration of their story means that there can be difficulties in deciding what they feel is relevant to include and what isn't. Moreover, a one-off interview means a participant is likely to not include every relevant story and present an account of their experience which reflects their current values. Linde (1993) reflected on this issue concluding that the process of 'looking back' into a person's life will involve selective editing depending on how they wish to portray their lives. Yardley (2008) draws attention to the ethical implications in portraying life stories as 'truthful' accounts and instead argues that researchers (who primarily take ownership of stories/interviews) are to provide an authentic 'likeness' to a person's experience.

In this sense, a life story reflects the trend within post-modernist and post-structuralist thinking that life is an open unit and cannot be adequately explained through labels and categories. It is a fluid and dynamic process which is open to change and potential for change at any given time. This can naturally be further complicated by migration which can significantly affect people's lives. As one can observe in one's own conversations and in the conversations of others, at different times, on different occasions, and with different people, individuals will give different accounts of the same events and of the reasons why they happened. As a person's life story is necessarily subject to revision and change, the migrant drops some old meanings and adds new meanings over time. The life story needs to be analysed in the context of the temporal period within which they are telling their story.

In speaking with returned migrants it was important to establish a time-frame with which they had returned i.e. between 1991 and 2011. Whilst the returned migrants had been away for varying lengths of time and were at different stages of their life, they all nevertheless returned at a significant time within recent Irish history. This significantly allowed for an appreciation of the wider structurating forces such as the austere budget conditions from the Irish recession in 2008 which affect and are affected by return migrants.

10.0 Conclusions

There have been significant challenges to defining migration(s) in large part because of the growing interest in mobility research. Naturally, different approaches to studying migration will be closely related to methods of data collection and methodology (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000). More macro focused studies will normally utilize larger data sets such as census information and seek to gain information on a large number of people perhaps using surveys. Micro level studies seeking perspectives from individuals or families for example would benefit from an in-depth study in the how's and why's of their experiences. As definitions of migration are complicated and statistical accounts are less than accurate or within Ireland 'patchy at best' (Gilmartin & White 2008, p. 146), there are significant gaps in migration research to be filled. Furthermore, recognizing that return migration is both a social and cultural event, imparts the use of a qualitative study to explore this complex process.

Researching return migrants as mobile people and with supposedly mobile identities, calls for the use of flexible research methods. It is not that quantitative

methods do not suit or have not been employed in previous migration research rather an approach which could remain open and adaptable to a multitude of experiences was called for. In particular, choosing a methodology which allowed the participants to share their experience in a way that was not dictated by me in a specific order with specific categories was needed. Life story interviews were deemed the most appropriate to allow access to a good number of participants and acquire a great level of detail from participants. Not without their disadvantages, they were nevertheless chosen in order to meet the needs of my research questions and reflected how I wanted to conduct my research.

Migration is an inherently interdisciplinary subject (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000). Whilst migration theories and studies all necessarily borrow from other social sciences, the same approach should apply to methods of data collection. Thus this study has incorporated ethnography, and more specifically a life story methodology, to explore the complexity of Irish migratory experiences and decision-making. In particular it will shed light onto an under-researched area within migration and mobility studies by looking at the everyday lives of returned migrants in Ireland. Examining mobility within a life story approach provides an examination of not only the participants' mobility but the researcher's also.

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