



The emotional geographies of global return migration to Vermont

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A B S T R A C T

The emotional dimensions of moving are receiving increased attention from scholars of transnational migration, yet the experiences of global return migrants, especially to rural areas, remain under-represented in the literature. This mixed-methods research with global return migrants to Vermont identified a set of shared values that draw returnees back to the state and a number of entangled emotions that characterize their return. Insights into the emotional dimensions of return were taken from a set of three nested studies using different research methods: an on-line survey on residential decision-making ($n = 3692$), a second on-line survey designed for global return migrants ($n = 35$) and four group interviews with global returnees. The analysis focuses on the sense of isolation returnees reported and the specific emotional and geographic adjustments they made to negotiate their estrangement at home. The concept of emotional reflexivity is used to analyze the making of emotional adjustments in both written accounts of moving home and in the embodied interactions of group interview participants. Working from an understanding of migration as a practice, this paper offers insight into the challenges of global return and suggests the need for additional research on the role of community space and emotional reflexivity in homecoming experiences.

1. The emotional experiences of rural return migrants

The emotional dimensions of transnational migration are the subjects of a growing literature, even while the broader field of migration research continues to be dominated by economic explanations for moves (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). Migration scholars are developing a deeper understanding of how guilt, shame, nostalgia, and desire for a new lifestyle, for example, influence the behaviors and experiences of people who have moved across international borders (Baldassar, 2015; Conradson and McKay, 2007; Eimmermann, 2017; Katigbak, 2017; Marcu, 2014; Svasek, 2010). The feelings and emotions associated with return migration, and especially transnational return migration to rural areas, are less commonly studied.

This paper examines the emotional, relational, and spatial dimensions of global return migration to the state of Vermont. Mixed-methods research revealed a set of shared values that drew returnees back to the state, a range of entangled emotions that characterize their return, and specific emotional and geographic adjustments returnees make to accommodate their new lives back home. I draw on Ahmed's (1999) notion of estrangement to explore participants' feelings of isolation upon their return and apply Holmes' (2010, 2015) concept of emotional reflexivity to analyze the relational aspects of fitting in. I find that group interviews can be a space for participants to relate their emotional experiences to others and for the researcher to observe emotional reflexivity in action. The paper closes with a call for research that

investigates how and if the making of international community space could improve global returnees' homecoming experiences.

The words 'feeling' and 'emotion' are used interchangeably in everyday speech, yet social scientists have attempted to pin down their different meanings (Svasek, 2010; Burkitt, 2014). Burkitt differentiates feelings from emotions in this way: "All emotions ... seem to be certain types of feeling, but not all feelings are emotions" (2014, 7). He further explains,

... what distinguishes feeling and emotion is not just that feeling is the bodily sensation which is central to all experiences of emotion. It is also to do with the social meanings we give to perceptual experiences and the context in which they arise. This is why certain bodily feelings are felt as emotions while other are experienced as feelings. (2014, 7)

This definition points to the importance of the embodied and relational dimensions of feelings, and how people make meaning from them. I do not tease apart feelings from emotions in this paper but instead focus on how participants interpret and relationally respond to their sensed experiences as they return home.

With the mention of 'home' I have introduced another word that carries many meanings. Critical geographies of home have revealed the complex linkages between emotion, memory, materiality, and identity (Duncan and Lambert, 2004; Blunt, 2005; Morrison, 2013). Home can be a location or a sense of belonging to others (Antonsich, 2010).

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Elsewhere, my colleague and I have argued that academic definitions of home tend to focus solely on built environments or social relations, excluding a broader non-human landscape that rural people may identify as a key component of home (Morse and Mudgett, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, I refrain from pinning down a definition of home as a sense of belonging, a particular place or landscape, or a web of social relations, allowing that in their everyday usage of the term, research participants may be using any of these meanings, alone or in combination.

The decision to move away has been described as “multilayered” (Cawley and Galvin, 2016). Recent research on return migration has shown that reasons to return are similarly complex and multi-factorial. Studies of global rural return migration are less numerous than those of out-migration and in-migration, however, extant studies show remarkably similar reasons for return across cultural contexts. For example, the desires to live near family, to raise children in one’s home area, to live in a small community, and to feel a sense of belonging have been identified as factors in rural return migration to Ireland (Cawley and Galvin, 2016; Ní Laoire, 2007), the United Kingdom (Holmes and Burrows, 2012), and the United States (von Reichert et al., 2014).

Return migration calls up many feelings and emotions. Migrants returning to the UK from Australia have felt guilt, homesickness, a sense of obligation, disappointment, and belonging (Holmes and Burrows, 2012). Ní Laoire (2007) found that return migrants to rural Ireland experienced a sense of claustrophobia and isolation, as most had migrated to large cities before returning to small towns and villages. She also noted that some felt pressure to conform to societal norms in rural Irish culture. Having experienced other places, the Irish return migrant occupies a position somewhere between a newcomer and an insider, and must perform in specific ways in order to appear “fully Irish” (Ní Laoire, 2008; Ralph, 2012). Cawley (2015) reported that returnees found it difficult to shift their identity once back in Ireland. Liu, a return migrant from New Zealand to China, acknowledged that her parents said her values had changed as a result elsewhere: “In their eyes I was not as ‘Chinese’ as I used to be” (2014, 20).

Returnees to rural areas have expressed that the perspectives they bring home are at times uninteresting to, or not welcomed by, people back home, and that they must keep quiet about their lives elsewhere in order to fit in (Ní Laoire, 2008). As De Bree et al. (2010) have pointed out, developing a sense of belonging upon return is a negotiated process.

The following section of the paper offers a theoretical framing for the process of emotionally negotiating moves, and for the role that emotional reflexivity may play in both transnational migration and in the doing of migration research. This is followed by a brief description of migration trends in the state of Vermont. The methods section explains in detail how each dataset was produced and analyzed. The emotional dimensions of returning home, and the adjustments respondents make in their return are thematically organized in the sections six and seven. The paper concludes with reflections on the spatial dimensions of adjusting to life at home after living abroad.

2. Negotiating the complex emotions of return migration

The migration literature reveals a range of feelings associated with moving but few insights into how migrants negotiate the in-between positions and complex emotions that migration produces. Ahmed’s (1999) study of the concept of home and identity in the lives of migrants presented an alternative to the home and away dichotomy. Home, she suggested, may be imagined as a skin:

The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as well. Here, movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such. That is, movement away is always affective: it affects how ‘homely’ one might feel and fail to feel.

(341)

Ahmed suggested that “estrangement” could aptly describe moving as a process, not from the state of being at-home to away, but from familiarity to strangeness. Recognizing this unfamiliarity with new places in others provides the potential for migrants to create new community spaces. Ahmed illustrated this point with the relationships forged by an Asian women writers’ group in the UK. She argued,

Migrant bodies hence cannot be understood as simply on one side of identity or the other, or on one side of the community or the other: rather, it is the uncommon estrangement of migration itself that allows migrant subjects to remake what it is they might yet have in common. (1999, 346)

Ahmed’s insistence on shifting definitions of home and identity allows us to see how new relationships can be made amongst people with different life circumstances within group spaces. While she does not explicitly mention the relational aspects of friendship-making, her contention that such experiences happen in community spaces implies that the process relies on interaction, and therefore is relational. Others have pointed out that moving is a practice through which identity is performed and re-worked (Halfacree and Merriman, 2015). Thinking of moving as a process opens up the opportunity to trace the dynamic, relational, and messy emotional dimensions of leaving and returning.

Relational interaction is at the heart of Holmes’ (2010) concept of “emotional reflexivity.” Defined as “the intersubjective interpretation of one’s own and others’ emotions and how they are enacted,” Holmes (2015, 61) has applied emotional reflexivity to understand how migrants experience and perform transnational migration and relationships (Holmes and Burrows, 2012; Holmes, 2015). Holmes developed her ideas, in part, in response to Giddens’ (1990) ideas about the role that risk plays in individuals’ negotiations of modern society. Giddens (1991) asserted that “high modernity” is distinguished from earlier historical periods by the presence of globalizing forces that have compressed time and space, disrupting traditional modes of passing on cultural information. In response, he argued, people reflexively respond to the conditions of their lived experience through thoughtful deliberation:

All human beings continuously monitor the circumstances of their activities as a feature of doing what they do, and such monitoring always has discursive features. In other words, agents are normally able, if asked, to provide discursive interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behaviour in which they engage. (1991, 35)

Along with others, Holmes has contested Giddens’ reliance on cognition in his model of reflexivity (Crossley, 2006; Burkitt, 2014). Instead, Holmes offered:

... I propose defining reflexivity as an emotional, embodied and cognitive process in which social actors have feelings about and try to understand and alter their lives in relation to their social and natural environment and to others. Emotions are understood not in terms of some that may retard reflection and some that may enhance it; rather reflexivity is thought to be more than reflection and to include bodies, practices and emotions. (2010, 140)

Holmes has used this definition to trace how people use the capacity to sense others’ emotions to make adjustments to a course of action. The emotional ‘dialogue’ between people includes words as well as tone, facial expressions and touch. In her interview research with transnational couples, for example, Holmes (2015) observed how one partner would explain their feelings about a sensitive topic and at the same time smile or touch their partner’s knee. She and her colleague have also traced reflexivity in a study of internet postings about return migration from Australia to the UK. They found that individual posters’ feelings about migration were informed and developed in relation to others’ written emotional accounts (Holmes and Burrows, 2012).

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