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Relational and gendered selves: Older Irish migrants' housing and employment histories in the North and East Midlands of England

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Abstract

Most accounts of migration stress the economic necessity, but generally blur the role of migrants themselves in the process. It is also rare to consider male and female migrants together, or to explore the relational aspects of masculinity and femininity in migration histories. This paper explores the relational aspects of Irish¹ migrants' residential and work histories using narrative enquiry. First, we explore the complex relationship between housing and employment in Irish women and men's stories focusing particularly on the early phase of migration. Second, we argue that these narratives, especially the 'intertwining personal, sub-cultural and cultural stories' are essential in understanding Irish migrants' experiences. Third, we posit that gender emerges as a significant factor with qualitative differences in Irish women's and men's trajectories. Our analysis focuses on the self-in-relation, housing pathways and gendered housing and employment strategies.

Keywords: Migrants, housing, employment, narratives, Irish

Introduction

Irish women and men constitute one of the largest groups of migrants in the British labour force (Walter, 2001). While there has been an increasing focus on 'new' migrants to Britain from the Commonwealth, the European Union (Ryan, 2007) and beyond (for example, Robinson, Reeve and Casey, 2007) we know relatively little about the experiences of more established European Union migrants with a longer history, including the Irish, with notable exceptions (Hickman and Walter, 1997; Gray, 2000; Casey and Flint, 2008; Walter, 2001). In that sense, we can characterise the current state of British migration studies as suffering from historical amnesia and being in the 'perpetual present' (Cole, 2006). In a similar vein, Elias (1978) strongly critiqued the 'narrowing' of the researcher's attention on immediate problems with a view to solving short-term issues at the expense of understanding their genesis over time (in O'Connor and Goodwin, 2012). More specifically, this gap also pertains to the field of housing studies in relation to migrants, where there is a dearth of research that utilises historical methodologies, including oral history, to which this paper is a direct response (Jacobs, 2001).

In the context of a long colonial history, the Irish have been an important source of migrant labour in Britain for over 200 years (Hickman, 1998, p.288). In the period following the Second World War, there was a growing demand for migrant labour from the

¹ 'Irish' is used throughout this article to refer to our participants who self-identified as 'Irish'. It is further noted that all of the participants were from the Republic of Ireland and hence does not include Northern Irish migrants. Where 'Ireland' is used it refers to the Republic of Ireland. .

Commonwealth, the Baltic States and from Ireland (McDowell, 2003). Ireland's changing status (and relationship) with Britain from 1945 onwards merits a brief consideration. British nationality law continued to recognise citizens of the Ireland/Eire as having the status of British subjects (and hence were entitled to travel to Britain for work) until the British Nationality Act 1949 came into force. The same Act provided that citizens of the Republic of Ireland would continue to be treated on a par with Commonwealth citizens. Migration was buoyant during this time period as a result of a mix of 'push' and 'pull' factors including a growth in demand for low-skilled and skilled labour in post-war Britain. This enabled the continuation of the 'special relationship' between the two countries making it relatively easy for Irish migrants to 'cross the water'. Irish people were encouraged to migrate to Britain and were given all the privileges of citizenship (McDowell, 2003, p. 868). 'In each of the years between 1946 and 1962 approximately 50,000 - 60,000 Irish women and men entered Britain and began to search for work' (ibid). Irish men commonly found work 'on the buildings' in the construction industry, a pattern that has persisted in more recent decades. This was true for around a fifth of white Irish men of working age in 2001, a proportion far higher than for any other population (Limbrick, 2007). Between a quarter and a third of Irish women were working in health and social care, a percentage which places them on a par with the Black African and Black Caribbean populations (Limbrick, 2007). The research findings presented here focus on the housing and employment experiences of Irish migrants in two English cities, Manchester in the North West and Leicester in the East Midlands regions in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. While there is growing evidence related to the Irish in Britain (Maye-Banbury and Casey, 2016; Casey, 2010) the focus tends to be on London and the South-East of England, with relatively little known about the Irish in other parts of Britain a dearth in the literature addressed here. Manchester and Leicester were case studies chosen for their capacity to yield previously undisclosed phenomena. We make no claim that the cities are representative of the Irish community in Britain – rather it was the potential for rich data collection which informed the rationale for the choice of case study cities.

Both Manchester and Leicester have long standing Irish communities where the reconstruction of Irish cultural identity and sense of self is an evolving process. Hence, they were ideal locations for a study of this kind. Manchester has the highest proportion of Republic of Ireland-born residents in the North West of England, around 8,700 persons (which amounts to 1.7% of the total population of Greater Manchester) (Ryan, *et al*, 2014, p.2). In Leicester, which is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Europe the White Irish make up 1.3% of the population of the city (Limbrick, 2007b, p.9). The first wave of Irish migrants mainly from the Irish Republic moved to Leicester after the Second World War in search of work in the city's growing economy. The extent to which the Irish migrant

experience in Leicester is framed by employment is reflected in existing scholarship and highlights discrimination in the labour market in respect of gender and occupation (King and O'Connor, 1996; Travers, 1997).

In telling us about their migration pathways, work and residential histories, people not only related their migration narratives in descriptive terms, but also highlighted important aspects of who they were, their personal identities and their sense of self-in-relation, i.e. the web of relationships in which they were embedded. (Mason, 2004, p.164). This relational layer in regard to other people, especially family, friends and work colleagues featured prominently in their accounts. When asked to relate to us their lives in England, our interviewees invariably focused on their formative and later experiences of home, work and place. The relative emphasis our interviewees placed on their recollections and experiences of housing prompted the use of a housing pathways approach.

Methodology and methods

Housing pathways seems to be a particularly useful framework for exploring residential histories and how these interact with employment factors in the trajectories of Irish migrants. A housing pathway is defined as 'the patterns of interaction (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space' (Clapham, 2002). As with the life history method, the emphasis when exploring housing pathways is on uncovering the understandings and experiences of individuals through empirical research and linking their actions to wider social structures (Robinson, Reeve and Casey, p.4, 2007). The pathways approach does not treat housing as being consumed in isolation. Rather, in this paradigm housing is viewed as being integral to other aspects of life, not least personal identity and employment.

The study adopted a narrative history approach which focused on the biographical telling of migratory stories and personal trajectories framed by structural constraints and processes (Mand, 2006). Following a life history method, the emphasis was on exploring the strategies of Irish migrants and linking their actions to wider structural factors (Robinson, Reeve and Casey, 2007), in particular the local housing and jobs market, as both emerged as defining features of our participants' stories. Heretofore, research using the housing pathways approach has used the household as the unit of analysis which limits the scope for individual actors to emerge. Moving the focus away from the household (Clapham, 2002 and Robinson, *et al* 2007) we took an alternative approach, towards a relational view of individuals' agency. This allowed for the trajectories of both women and men to remain in focus. Particular attention was paid to the life-stages which punctuated stability and change in migrants' experiences and their reflexivity in making sense of their lives, in some cases lived transnationally, over time. In doing so, such an approach contributes to restoring a

sense of agency to participants, placing them centre stage in any explanation of their own experiences (Datta, et al, 2009, p.858).

The narratives presented here are notable both because of their typicality and their exceptionality (Newendorp, 2010, p.84). A particular emphasis was placed on how our participants told their 'collective story'. Following Van den Hoonaard (2013), we argue that this allows for a more critical understanding of their shared experiences. Importantly, it also allows for 'private problems to be conceptualised as public issues, thereby making collective identity and collective solutions possible' (Richardson, 1990, p.28). However, while there were common features of the migration process and a similar response to local circumstances, the narratives contained in this paper demonstrate that our interviewees also experienced their journeys (metaphorically) as uniquely their own, and expressed them in these terms.

A focus on the content and structure of narrative accounts and the relationship between meaning and action contained therein is a useful vehicle for understanding how people make sense of their migration experiences (Ahmed, 2013). The narratives highlighted here have been somewhat altered by the process of analysis and subsequent writing. In particular, we have paraphrased parts of their stories and have selected relevant sections as quotations. While this has the side effect of their narratives being presented in places a little like 'interview quotes' (Mand, 2006, p.1063), it is hoped we have retained the essence of what our participants presented to us. We were aware of the limitations of oral histories, not least the inconsistency and reliability of memory and the problems inherent in recalling experiences from a distant past (Batty, 2009). However, as the study was more concerned with the recollection of experiences rather than establishing historical 'facts', from this perspective the method was justified.

The sample was predicated on recruiting both men and women who had migrated to either city during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Hence, our sample was gathered during several days of participant observation and informal conversations with key stakeholders at two venues known to be popular with Irish elders, at an Irish tea dance (Manchester) and Irish luncheon club (Leicester). In the event, a total of 19 in-depth interviews (6 men and 13 women) were carried out in 2014-15, in participants' own homes, with interviews lasting between 50 minutes and two and a half hours. The participants ranged in age from 70 to 86 years old. Appendix 1 outlines further details of the sample.

Theoretical framework: an interdependent, relational and gendered approach to migration

The individualisation thesis is premised on the ushering in of a 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000), characterised by 'detraditionalisation' (Duncan and Smith, 2006) and a more individualised approach to shaping one's own history and biography unfettered by traditional structural constraints. Social ties of family and community are weakened, increasingly giving way to a 'project of the self' (Casey and Allen, 2007). In parallel, identity is also conceptualised as a social concept, informed by, and in relation to others. While recognising that identities may be multiple (Lawlor, 2008) the notion of identity itself, for some revolves strongly around a group orientation, family, gender, class or other relational ties and/or constraints (McCarthy, 2015, p.14). Following Powell (2011), we take the view that while the individualisation thesis may hold true at a general societal level, it needs to be re-interrogated in relation to marginal groups such as migrants, who may not have the same resources, reflexivities or inclinations to invest in a project of the self.

Of particular relevance to migration Norbert Elias (1978) draws our attention to the increasing number and density of webs of interdependence, which includes increasing flows of people across space as nations and populations become more and more interdependent and society more complex. But interdependencies are always changing and in flux alongside wider economic and social changes which are manifest in the everyday lives and experiences of migrants. This positioning provides a dynamic starting point for analysing the social phenomenon of migration through its relationships (Kirk, 2012, p.117) which are embedded in complex historical processes. In developing a group orientation, Elias (1978) conceptualises the radical interdependence of humans on one another as 'figurations'. Figurations can best be described and analysed as constellations of people interrelated in processes that come with mobility and migration over time (Benz, et al, 2012). The relations in these fluctuating figurations create and support social networks which are sustained through the exchange of people, ideas and resources. These networks provide connectivity and exchangeability to address problems that may present themselves (Benz *et al* 2012). In essence, actors strive to link into networks that will support their needs in the migration process. And yet we know little about how the figurations of migrants play out over time and space and which are worthy of further investigation.

The idea of 'relational selves' appears to be particularly useful in this regard (Mason 2004, p,163). In this understanding, people, selves and values are conceptualised as 'relational, connected and embedded'. Analysis is focused on the enduring significance of family ties and kinship networks and the ways in which people live their lives in *connection* with others. Further, in problematizing the individualisation thesis, Mason (2004) suggests that attention needs to be paid to the ways in which social identities and agency are relational, a call to which this paper responds. In particular, we were interested in the extent to which migrant

identities and agency acted in relation to shape the priorities, assumptions and strategies of our participants.

Traditionally, migration has been conceptualised primarily as an economic process, the ultimate 'push' factor propelling migrants from the place of origin to 'host' country. However, more recent scholarship has focused on migration as a broader socio-cultural phenomenon which is mediated by gender and kinship ideologies (Pessar and Mahler, 2003). A gendered perspective is conducive to exploring a multiplicity of issues and motives other than purely economic ones for pursuing the migration project (Lutz, 2010). Gender is implicated in the migration process in important ways, including in relation to how to 'do' gender in a transnational context (McIlwaine, *et al*, 2006; Datta, 2009, Pessar and Mahler, 2003).

Following Beverly Skeggs (1997) the focus is on how inscribed experiences of being 'female' and 'male' in migratory spaces, framed by structural constraints, are manifest in the concrete specifics of everyday life. Specifically, we explore ways in which day to day lives and social and spatial practices combine in the social production (Conlon, 2007) of Irish migrants. This is in keeping with a growing appreciation of how gender shapes transnational migration (Pessar and Mahler, 2003, Ryan, 2008) and conversely, how migratory processes impact on the negotiation and renegotiation of gender roles and identities (Gray, 2000, 2004; Walter, 2001). By bringing gender into the analysis migration is no longer seen as the choice of atomised individuals but emerges as a phenomenon involving a web of social relations and familial and friendship networks (Ryan, 2008, Assis, 2014). Our study incorporates a more diverse range of migrants, both men and women, in a number of occupations, in the health, retail and domestic sectors and manual trades. Further, addressing a gap in the literature, this paper presents a more fine-grained and broader analysis of gender in relation to home, employment and social networks not only at the point of migration but over the respondents' life-course.

Discussion

The self-in-relation: place, employment and housing

The early phase of migration and housing

Our participants were both active and passive in the creation of themselves as migrants in the city and hence, not just a passive reflection of economic forces determined externally. Through different strategies, they shaped the migration process (Fontes, 2011). Family and friendship networks were particularly important in the early phases of migration (Ryan, 2008, Ryan, *et al*, 2015), and used as a key resource in coming to terms with the unfamiliarity of

place. Family contacts were especially valuable, not only for information but for the collective cultural expectations of their intended destinations. Expectations of a better life in England were quickly tempered by their initial experiences. Denis², a builder's labourer conveys a particularly gloomy first impression:

'It wasn't a nice place...at that time. It was very dull and dark. And they were very strict with rules. The shops, you know and things like that. The shops were very strict about closing times'.

Eileen's account relayed a pioneering spirit as she prepared to move to England aged eighteen. She had hoped her new life would yield excitement, adventure and opportunity. Her preconceptions were violated when she realised that both recreational opportunities and housing options were limited.

'It was totally different to what I was used to...We lived in a flat – which was absolutely horrible'.

Nonetheless, what emerged from the narratives was a strong determination to come to terms with 'ruptured expectations' (Newendorp, 2010, p. 72), and an attitude of resilience in getting used to new surroundings. What was striking in people's narratives was the sense of contingency and constraint (Mason, 2004, p.166) in negotiating the basics of their new lives, in particular employment and housing. The lack of choice and agency was particularly evident in the women's narratives as they were far more likely than their male counterparts to be reliant on pre-arranged employment and tied accommodation. Indeed, securing a job and a place to live in advance of migration was often a pre-requisite for young women to be given 'permission' by their parents to move 'across the water'. Women were more likely than men to bring readily transferable occupational skills and potential, specifically (although not exclusively) in nursing, domestic work and catering.

Gráinne had been working on her father's farm for a short period of time having left school and did not see that as a long-term option. Her job prospects were poor given the high levels of unemployment in Ireland at the time and she felt she had little choice but to emigrate to England. Her parents were reluctant to let her go but reluctantly gave their consent on the basis that she got a live-in job. She had a strong sense of the kind of jobs that would be available to her as a young, unqualified female migrant and made decisions within a limited framework of constraint: to be a nurse, work in a factory or 'do housework' as 'the three options'.

² All names have been changed in keeping with the ethical principles of anonymity and confidentiality

'They used to advertise in the paper and you could either be a nurse, work in a factory or do housework, that was the three options. So I didn't want to be a nurse, I faint at the sight of blood, I didn't want to work in a factory and I chose housework.

Although Grainne was quite proud of the fact that she had resisted the (gendered) assumption she would become a nurse she opted for housework, widely assumed to be 'women's work'.

As exemplified by Grainne's account, a key feature was the close interrelationship between accommodation and employment, particularly in the initial phases of migration. Tied accommodation had a significant role to play in the early housing experiences of some migrants. This link between accommodation and employment also had a distinct gender dimension. It was very common for women to secure employment in nursing or domestic service prior to leaving Ireland, both of which featured full board in a nursing home or 'live-in accommodation' in private homes or hotels.

Like Grainne, Cait provided a similar background context for her decision to emigrate, coupled with a stronger desire to escape the mundanity of farm life, in effect a bid for freedom. She was the youngest of six children and all her siblings had gone before her, leaving her to work on the home farm.

'All the rest of them, they all left home, when I left I was 23 or 24, I did have to work really hard on the farm and when I got away from it and come back here [to England] and work in the factories I thought it was a holiday, and I loved it from the day I set foot in England, absolutely loved it.... When I come back here it was the freedom I thought. I got freedom'

Ironically, Cait went straight into working in a hotel with live-in accommodation with quite strict rules and regulations attached to her living 'all in', particularly in regard to night-time curfews and the ban on having visitors to her room. The majority of women perceived they had very limited choice in where and how they lived, and their narratives are replete with references to 'putting up with' with real restrictions on their freedom, which assumed an almost 'doxic' quality of normalisation (Bourdieu, 1993) in the telling. This was 'the ways things were' and a resistance to the dominant social mores in relation to socialising and the rules governing live-in accommodation were rarely problematized or challenged. Nursing homes were a particular site of surveillance where the behaviour of young Irish nurses was closely scrutinised and policed. Unlike migrants living-in in hotels where there was relatively more freedom, every aspects of nursing students' work *and* home life was strictly monitored.

'Well we weren't too impressed, it was very old fashioned, nobody had a shared room, we all had our own rooms, it was basic....everything was in our lodgings, board and lodgings.... You couldn't go very far at night, if you wanted to go out and have a late night out you had to go to matron and ask for a late pass'

Nuala, born in Roscommon, moved to England in 1944 to work as a domestic assistant at a psychiatric Hospital. She was recruited by a company which arranged work for young Irish women in England. Having two sisters living in Birmingham legitimised Nuala's rite of passage to England. However, the extent to which her mobility was tightly controlled by the authorities became clear when she was refused a travel warrant to attend her mother's funeral in Ireland six weeks after her arrival in England.

'I came in May 1944...they use to come over recruiting. There was no work in Ireland at that time. There were a lot of Irish girls recruited. And we cried. And we said: "What brought us here? We'll go home tomorrow". But you could only go home every six months during the war. My mum died six weeks after I came here - she died suddenly. And I couldn't go home for her funeral. You could only get a permit if it was a husband or wife. They'd only give you a permit every six months. Linked to my passport. I still have it...Once you were here, you couldn't leave your job without permission from the Ministry of Labour. "Condition to disembark" - it was marked on our passports.'

By contrast, boarding houses, referred to as 'lodgings' or 'digs' by our respondents played a vital role in the early immigration phase for male migrants. They consolidated and broadened the migrants' social networks which had a key role to play in their social and economic prospects. A common strategy for men was to secure 'digs' first and then look for casual employment in the area, as outlined by Eoghan:

'When we got it [their digs], we walked around and looked for a building site. We got a start [a job] there'

Tom describes a fairly typical scenario in living in a boarding house:

'She had a big house where there was probably about, at some given time you'd be about 15 or 20 blokes in the house cos there was a lot of big rooms and maybe three or four beds in each room.... It was a working class boarding house, sometimes you'd go back at night time and there'd be three or four Sikhs with their turbans sitting at the kitchen table and she took anybody in as long as they could pay the

£2.50. So it was a house with a lot of camaraderie cos there was a lot of Irish kids in it... from all over the place and it was good craic at night time... nobody would be having any money to go out for any beer cos they'd spent it all over the weekend or they sent it home to their parents, as I used to do.

Mutual support and reciprocity featured prominently in the coping strategies of people in our study. In this 'chain migration' scenario, 'pioneer' migrants offered support and often a place to live to family and kin who migrated at a later stage to the same city.

In the following extract Brid helps to illustrate these points as she explains how she and her sisters gave their brother shelter and other practical support when he arrived in England:

'My brother come to Stockport, he didn't like it, my other brother come... I had no room to keep him but he went and stayed with my sister and then my other sister. But he used to come in for his dinner to me and I lived on Woodside Road then and he left me money and said 'will you go and get me shopping...[he] didn't like it at all'

Brid's account gives an insight into how gender-specific roles were re-enacted in new surroundings and how these roles played out in the domestic realm. Women stepped into the role of 'mother' in offering support to brothers and other male relatives in the migration process. Both men and women relied on each other to point them in the direction of getting a decent place to live and 'a start' (i.e. a job).

The importance of home as a locale through which 'key kinship ties are reinforced' was also a potent cultural and individual ideal (Kellet and Moore, 2003: 128), a topic to which the paper now turns.

Housing pathways and housing histories

We asked our participants to talk about where they had lived since they had first arrived in England; what moves they had made over time; the triggers for residential mobility and the extent to which their Irish heritage had figured in these processes (if at all). Migrants in our study had varied residential histories, but also shared some common features. The 'first destination' housing for the majority was either in tied accommodation, lodgings or staying with a relative or friend. From there, it was usual to move into private rented accommodation prior, both before and after marriage, spending some time saving enough money for a deposit on a house.

Yet, there was little sense from our participants that they were on a housing ladder or that they conceptualised their housing in terms of having a housing career (Robinson, Reeve and

Casey, 2007). On the contrary, serendipity and pragmatism were key features of the narratives in relation to housing. The *social mediation* of residential histories featured strongly in their accounts of house moves made over time, and in relation to a complex negotiation of social, familial and economic and contextual factors. Place had a resonance in that people were drawn to areas that were convenient for work and socialising in the early phase of migration. In particular, renting a flat or house near to where they worked was a priority for many young women, who were unlikely to be able to drive and hence were reliant on public transport.

Niamh had a fairly typical housing trajectory which involved living with her sister when she first arrived. She then moved with her brother and a couple of Irish cousins and friends into a large house (lodgings) which was owned by another Irish woman. This was in an area popular with Irish people, close to the city centre which helped her to feel 'at home' while 'away from home'.

'And then I went to live with my brother, cos my sister wanted to go off and do her nursing and she went to live in nursing accommodation. My brother met a girl in Ireland and they lived in Nottingham and they all moved to Manchester, so I lived with them cos they had a very big house with loads of lodgers. It belonged to my brother's girlfriend's mother and she became the landlady when another relation who'd had the house previously sold it to them'.

She described a not uncommon housing situation whereby 'digs' would be owned by an Irish landlady who would rent rooms to a close network of family, friends and neighbours from the same village in Ireland. Hence, the digs Niamh lived in initially was known as an 'Offaly [an Irish county] boarding house'. This was followed by one or two shared flats with some Irish friends she'd made while working in a large biscuit factory in the same part of the city. Getting a job at this particular factory was mainly through word of mouth and consequently there was a critical mass of Irish people working there who also shared accommodation and socialised together. Niamh's narrative gives an insight into the dense network of Irish community contacts which was a safety net for those in need of a job, or 'a start' as it was commonly referred to (especially by men), a place to live and 'the craic' (i.e. a social life). Prior to getting married Niamh moved into a number of rented houses. Unlike others, she did not move on to buying her own house but after a marriage breakdown instead moved into social housing, a tenure within which she has remained up to the present day.

As might have been expected once migrants began to settle down and have children their priorities changed over the life course. Having lived in a series of rented houses with shared bathrooms and living facilities, most people were keen to have their own home, and this

meant owner-occupation for the most part. Family, and occasionally friends, provided a helping hand in getting a deposit on a house, or securing a mortgage for first time buyers. Interestingly, council housing was not considered as a tenure of *choice* for the majority. When migrants did move into council housing, it was almost always because of marriage break-down or for health reasons.

Residential histories brought to the fore key features in their life stories and highlighted what mattered most to our participants. Proximity to good Catholic schools became more important, and attendance at local Catholic churches had the added bonus of keeping people in close contact with other Irish people, albeit on a more casual and sporadic basis than would have been the case heretofore. Aileen, a divorced mother of two and a council tenant describes her rationale for moving in the following words:

'They went to school at St Joseph'ss, they'd gone for confirmation and everything there. And they stayed there cos my daughter wanted to go to the [Catholic] school in Sunnyside, my sister had said her daughter was going to go the next year so we had to stay there to be in the boundaries.... Yeah, also I didn't move for a year or two cos my son got into St Anthony's in that area,, another Catholic school and I wanted him to go in a good area'.

In later middle age, the importance of extending to their own children the familial support which they themselves had so poignantly lacked, became a key driver for any housing decisions made. It was also a significant part of the rationale for remaining in their adopted country, thereby neatly side-stepping the possibility of return migration to Ireland, about which many of our participants had mixed feelings.

Gendered work experiences and practices

Transience and mobility were key features of the employment trajectories of both men and women, the exceptional case of the nursing profession notwithstanding. Men who were mainly labourers in the construction industry presented themselves as resilient and strong – the hero narrative, in the face of demanding and 'brutal' working conditions. Employment was seasonal, casual and subject to the vagaries of a fluctuating building and road-building industry, as described by Cormac a qualified electrician:

We'd just put our bags in Miss Cullen's and the next day we were walking down towards Main Street, off South Street and there was a building site going there and Dennis said to this chap 'any chance of us starting?' he said 'yes, the pair of you start tomorrow' and I thought 'well I may as well start with him rather than be out of a job'

so I took a job as a labourer digging the foundations of this big building and later on I got into my own trade.

Skilled workers such as Cormac, fared much better than casual labourers and were able to position themselves to get more permanent and better paid employment than those on casual day rates.

'It was a bit hard going, whenever I first started there... There was times when I was out of work and when times changed round a bit, I can remember being out of work maybe about two or three months I'd rove around all over the place, wherever the jobs were and the good money was, and at that time what they used to do was the foreman would come down the road, and it would be 'you, you and you, you've finished' and I thought 'that's the last time that's going to happen to me' so somebody said to me 'why don't you get a job with the Electricity Board you'll always have a job there'.

The importance of family and social relations was deeply embedded in women's narratives, to a much greater extent than in men's stories, and provided the key focus for decisions made around employment. Lacking local family networks for childcare the women's stories (in sharp contrast to their male counterparts) featured a complex juggling of family responsibilities with their working lives. Part-time work, unsociable hours and gaps in employment history were common features of the chequered working lives of these women.

Further, women's work, however skilled, was invariably not seen as more valuable or lucrative than men's and hence it was the former and not the latter who adjusted their employment to family life. Relying on their husband's mainly minimum wage incomes was a difficult task, and often resulted in women taking up a series of part-time jobs to supplement the family income. Nollaig's husband suffered from bouts of ill-health which seriously affected his ability to retain his casual and physically demanding job in construction.

'He lost jobs time after time... everybody said he was a fantastic worker but they'd give them the trucks to take home and in the morning Tomas wouldn't turn up. They'd have to come and take away the truck, but they'd still come back for him. So that's why I had to do two or three jobs while Nuala was at school and at times I used to take her to work with me'.

Working at night in order to fit in with their husband's working day was a common strategy. It was even more difficult to manage when men were away for a week (or more) at a time working on various road-building or other construction sites.

'He used to come about every fortnight cos they used to be working seven days a week and sometimes if some of the lads would be coming home they'd come home on a Saturday afternoon, and he'd go back again on a Monday morning and he'd sometimes only come for the weekend and by that time my youngest was 15 so I used to work at night then'

Importantly, rather than being passive 'victims' of unfortunate circumstances, women utilised a rich variety of social and economic resources to support their families in straitened circumstances. For example, Maura moved from rented accommodation to becoming an owner-occupier who took in lodgers when her husband became ill.

'There was no easy times here at that time.... The man told me in the town hall 'if you were on rent you'd have got a rebate but cos you're on a mortgage they don't pay a mortgage' There was five bedrooms. I intended to go to Ireland and luckily I didn't cos Pdraig was ill for six months, out of work, and a house and a mortgage and six children. You see, I'd plenty of rooms, I'd a French girl for about three years and she cried when she was leaving, she was like one of the family.'

Ciara, also took in teaching students to supplement her husband's modest income as well as holding down a job as a carer in a local care home. She juggled her job with providing meals and accommodation, without the support of her husband who was also working long hours in a gas company. She also distinguished herself from other Irish Catholic landladies at the time by her willingness to take in Irish Protestants, which she described as unusual for the period. This suggests that religious allegiances and political divisions continued to exert a strong influence within the Irish diaspora and which had an impact on housing prospects for a minority.

Conclusions

In this article, we explored the diversity of women and men's migration trajectories in the North West and East Midlands of England in the decades after the Second World War. The research has revealed the extent to which the discourse of agency was embedded in first person accounts of Irish migrants' experiences in Leicester and Manchester. The use of narratives as a 'container' in which to capture the concept of relational selves (Mason, 2004) enabled us to uncover the intricate interdependencies upon which our migrants depended to establish themselves in their host cities. These figurations highlight how both men and women negotiated their new life through continuums of pragmatism and compliance relying to varying degrees and with different levels of intensity on social networks over time. In the initial stages, the constellation of migrants was largely focused on securing basic needs with

participants relying on family and friends networks to attain a foothold in Leicester and Manchester respectively, while in the later stages social networks were more valued for connectivity with Irish culture and heritage. Hence, as Elias (1978) would suggest the figurational process itself, embedded within these migrants lives, was subject to fluidity and change.

Our findings can only be tentative as the qualitative research is based on 19 in-depth interviews and therefore we cannot claim to provide an exhaustive or representative account of the lives of Irish migrants in a particular time and place. We do however, suggest that we have constructed a plausible and thought-provoking re-telling of our participants relational housing and employment histories. We anticipate that similar interpretations of migrants' trajectories may apply elsewhere among other migrant groups during the same time period. At the very least, the study has uncovered some rich insights into the housing and employment strategies and experiences of Irish migrants which add to the growing body of literature on the topic (Ryan, 2008; Casey, 2010).

Housing market constraints, combined with fluctuating and contingent employment opportunities, provided the structural backdrop to our participants' narratives. However, we extended our analysis to include not only structural and institutional constraints but other factors in the housing field, including attitudes and preferences (Clapham, 2002). Our research engages with and adds depth to the notion of housing pathways which takes account of the dynamics of structure *and* agency, and therefore offers a rounded framework for examining processes and experiences of housing and migration. Following a housing pathways approach we argued that the importance of agency and identity, as well as structural factors in Irish migrants' orientation to local housing and employment markets needs, to be given due recognition. As Hochstenbach and Boterman (2014) also note, our migrants housing pathways are constructed in a non-linear way with reference not only to constraints but as a result of strategic and tactical navigation within a [localised] housing field.

In terms of housing policy and migration these findings point to the importance of tied accommodation and the private rented sector in the early housing pathways of Irish migrants. Subject to the vagaries of a poor supply of affordable housing in the early years, these migrants relied on tied accommodation as a stepping stone, rented accommodation of generally poor quality, familial and social networks and a combination of serendipity and resourcefulness in order to secure more permanent housing. This reliance on the private rented sector in the early migration phase, we suggest, may apply to other migrants groups in contemporary Britain and further afield. However, based on the diversity of attitudes and

preferences uncovered in our study, we would also caution against assumptions of homogeneity and universal preferences applied to more recent migrants' housing trajectories.

The paper has also revealed the relative importance of gender in understanding our participants' reconstructions of housing and the local (ised) labour market. Specifically, our findings suggest that a key difference between Irish women and men in their experiences of employment over time was the extent to which women's work in the public sphere was intimately related to the private sphere to a far greater extent than men's. Women were much more likely to work in domestic service, nursing or catering, all jobs traditionally associated with tied accommodation. However, the processes of migration which invariably meant a rupture from close family also presented new possibilities and wage-earning possibilities, albeit within the constraints of family responsibilities and home-life. Women's engagement with part-time work in a variety of sectors and in the home (including the case of our two landladies) also impacted on adaptation to their adopted city. Therefore, these migration narratives present evidence of an accommodation to the dominant social order, as well as their modification, to a lesser extent. Further, it is pertinent to suggest that the extent to which these migrant women both resisted and complied with gender expectations is an issue worthy of further exploration within more recent and diverse migrant groups in the UK and internationally.

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Appendix 1: Sample of participants

Interview no.	Year born	Gender	Year Emigrated	Marital status	Occupation
1	1939	F	1957	Married	Auxiliary nurse
2	1939	F	1955	Married (widow)	Domestic assistant
3	1938	M	1956	Married (widower)	Labourer
4	1946	M	1947	Married (widower)	Publican and property developer
5	1936	M	1957	Married (widower)	Factory operative (rubber industry)
6	1940	M	1955	Married (widower)	Coal miner
7	1945	F	1960	Divorced	Hotel receptionist
8	1935	F	1948	Married (widow)	Nurse
9	1939	M	1950	Married	Sheep farmer
10	1937	M	1956	Married (widow)	Electrician and labourer
11	1936	F	1956	Married (widow)	Auxiliary nurse, retail assistant
12	1939	F	1958	Married	SEN; bar worker
13	1938	F	1962	Married (widow)	Housekeeper; factory operative
14	1932	F	1952	Married (widow)	Factory operative
15	1939	F	1957	Married	SEN
16	1935	F	1952	Married	Full time carer
17	1946	F	1960	Divorced	Housekeeper
18	1936	F	1954	Married (widow)	Cleaner
19	1930	F	1944	Married (widow)	Domestic Assistant