



Unravelling the migration decision-making process: English early retirees moving to rural mid-Wales



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Rural
Migration
Decision-making
Motivational sound bites
Quality of life

There are established migrant reasons to explain rural in-migration. These include quality of life, rural idyll and lifestyle motivations. However, such one-dimensional sound bites portray rural in-migration in overly simplistic and stereotypical terms. In contrast, this paper distinguishes the decision to move from the reason for moving and in doing so sheds new light on the interconnections between different domains (family, work, finance, health) of the migrant's life which contribute to migration behaviour. Focussing on early retirees to mid-Wales and adopting a life course perspective the overall decision to move is disaggregated into a series of decisions. Giving voices to the migrants themselves demonstrates the combination of life events necessary to lead to migration behaviour, the variable factors (and often economic dominance) considered in the choice of destination (including that many are reluctant migrants to Wales), and the perceived 'accidental' choice of location and/or property. It is argued that quality of life, rural idyll and lifestyle sound bites offer an inadequate understanding of rural in-migration and associated decision-making processes. Moreover, they disguise the true nature of migrant decision making.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the counterurbanisation trends of the 1970s were first identified (Beale, 1975; Champion, 1989) researchers have sought to not only explain the phenomenon but also the associated migrant motivations. Counterurbanisation represents the (then unexpected) demographic changes giving rise to unprecedented population growth in non-metropolitan and rural areas. It has been present ever since to varying degrees in western countries (Fielding, 1982; Vining and Kontuly, 1978) including, most recently, countries within the former East European Bloc (Brown et al., 2005; Simon, 2012). Nevertheless, 'definitional confusion abounds' (Mitchell, 2004: 17) with Champion (1992), Halfacree (1994) and Boyle and Halfacree (1998) suggesting that counterurbanisation is a chaotic concept. It is not surprising then that the recognised explanations behind counterurbanisation are also disputed (Mitchell, 2004). Indeed irrespective of whether or not a textbook definition of counterurbanisation *per se* is present (See Champion, 1989) there is general agreement that - - '[r]esidential use has become an emerging function of the post-productivist or consumption

countryside' (Bijker et al., 2012: 490). While in-migration is now an established feature of rural society it is increasingly recognised that counterurbanisation offers only a partial explanation (Milbourne, 2007; Grimsrud, 2011). There is greater spatial diversity to rural in-migration, as well as increasing variability in migrant characteristics and motivations, than is captured by counterurbanisation alone. Different rural areas attract different migrant types who move for different motivations (Stockdale, 2006). Nevertheless, migrant motivations are frequently expressed in the geography, sociology and rural literature in terms of quality of life or lifestyle decisions and changing residential preferences in favour of the rural idyll (Boyle and Halfacree, 1998; Davies, 2008; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). The motives behind rural in-migration are therefore assumed to be widely understood. In this paper, such understandings are challenged and, in particular, an attempt is made to unravel the associated migrant decision-making processes which in themselves have received limited attention from scholars in rural and migration studies.

This paper focuses on the 'decision' to move to a rural location as distinct from the 'reason' for moving. In doing so, it adopts a behavioural approach. It is argued that the decision-making process associated with rural in-migration has largely been ignored or over-generalised in the literature and, consequently, has been reduced to simple 'reasons for move' sound bites: quality of life,

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lifestyle reasons and rural idyll. Such stereotypical motivations have the effect of reducing, what is likely to be a complex interplay of individual and personal factors and influences, to a one-dimensional and highly simplistic understanding of the actual decision-making process associated with a move to rural areas. In blunt terms, there is a need to appreciate and unravel the complexity of individual migrant behaviour. 'While broad economic and social forces matter enormously as the main drivers of internal migration in the UK, so also do the myriad particularities of individual migration decisions' (Fielding, 2012:126).

The current study adopts a life course perspective drawing on migrants' individual life narratives to demonstrate the inappropriateness of common motivational sound bites. A life course perspective recognises, first, that migration decisions vary at different stages of the individual's life (Rossi, 1955; Fischer and Malmberg, 2001) and, second, that migration or residential decisions will not be made in isolation from other aspects of the individual or household's life. Indeed, migration '... occurs within the 'hurly-burly' of everyday life; decision-making cannot be assumed to occur outside that messiness' (Boyle and Halfacree, 1998: 312). Migration has been similarly portrayed as 'messy' by Stockdale (2009). Equally, it is suggested that the decision to move to a rural location may not always be a rational or conscious decision: which is how it is frequently portrayed in the literature. Life events, of which migration is one, are rarely that predictable. Different people will respond to similar migration triggers differently. Most likely, a particular set of personal circumstances will have brought the individual or household to a rural destination. For others, especially couples, the decision-making process will involve negotiation or compromise between partners. By adopting a life course perspective it is possible to unravel the migrant decision-making process and shed greater insights into and understandings of this important migration flow. The focus of this paper is on early retirees who have moved to rural mid-Wales. This life course stage and age cohort (typically those aged between 50 and 65 years at the time of their move) are consistently reported in the literature as being associated with (but not to the exclusion of others) rural in-migration and counterurban flows (Brown and Glasgow, 2008; Stockdale, 2006).

The remainder of the paper is organised into four sections. The first presents a short overview of the counterurbanisation and rural in-migration literature, and includes reference to commonly acknowledged migrant motivations. In particular, it distinguishes between current understanding of migrant motives and reasons for moving and the much less understood migrant decision-making process. The importance of undertaking a life course perspective to understand and unravel this decision-making process is also introduced. This is followed by an explanation of the behavioural and biographical methodology adopted which relates to the use of semi-structured migrant interviews incorporating migrants' individual life histories and personal narratives of the decision-making process. The third section gives voices to the migrants themselves at each stage of a three stage decision-making process: the initial decision to move, their choice of destination, and choice of property or specific location within that destination. The fourth and final section concludes the analysis and highlights the value of a life course perspective to unravel the multiple decisions associated with a move to rural areas.

2. Rural in-migration: who, why and when?

Depopulation characterised rural communities for much of the last century: that is, until the 'population turnaround' of the 1970s when for the first time many rural areas recorded a population growth driven by counterurban migration flows. While some allege

that '[u]rban-rural migration is ... a geographically selective process' (van Dam et al., 2002: 473) such flows have been observed to varying degrees and at varying times in differing types of rural environment (Halfacree, 2008, 2012) throughout the western world. 'Counterurbanisation' in many ways has remained a 'catch all' term for rural in-migration, despite Cloke's (1985) warnings of such almost thirty years ago; however, it is increasingly acknowledged that rural in-migration is not exclusively of urban origin. Lateral rural moves have also been observed (Halliday and Coombes, 1995; Pooley and Turnbull, 1996; Stockdale, 2006; Gkartzios and Scott, 2010) alongside in-migration to urban-rural fringe areas (Andersen, 2011; Mahon et al., 2012) and remote and peripheral rural locations (Bijker et al., 2012; Stockdale and MacLeod, 2013).

Although many countries and regions participated in this new spatial distribution of population and associated migration trends, it was unlikely that they could be explained by a single factor. Indeed, multiple explanations have been debated which are assumed to vary in importance between and within individual countries. Briefly these explanations included a behavioural approach which emphasised the importance of residential preferences – described as the counterurbanisation model by Fielding (1982); the importance of structural factors which at its basis argued that the emergent population patterns were employment-led with people following jobs into rural areas (Keeble and Tyler, 1995); and the role of the State through regional policies and planning controls (Stockdale, 1992), or other external forces such as land markets and commuting costs (Detang-Dessendre et al., 2008). For a more detailed account of the recognised explanations for counterurbanisation see Champion (1989) and Mitchell (2004).

The characteristics and personal motivations of individual migrants have also attracted considerable empirical inquiry. Stereotypical images portray the rural in-migrant as middle-aged – perhaps even retired – and middle class, who has moved to fulfil a residential preference for a 'place in the country' (Hardill, 2006) or to satisfy a quest for the 'rural idyll' (Blekesaune et al., 2010; Matthews et al., 2000; van Dam et al., 2002). Such a migrant profile has tended to be exaggerated and/or applies to specific locations only (Hoggart, 1997). For example, almost twenty-five years ago Bolton and Chalkley (1989: 250) asserted that counterurbanisation involved 'ordinary people' and 'the masses', and more recently Halfacree (2008: 491) speaks of '... its seeming ordinariness in terms of who is involved'. This has been borne out by several studies. In Sweden (Lindgren, 2003) and the Netherlands (Bijker et al., 2012) a counterurban move is frequently associated with those less well-off. Across Europe, it is associated with migrants of all ages and life course stages – those with young families, middle-aged, and the elderly (Phillips, 1993; van Dam et al., 2002; Detang-Dessendre et al., 2008; Simon, 2012; Smith and Higley, 2012; Stockdale and Catney, 2014).

As might be expected given the variability of migrant characteristics the individual motivations behind a move to a rural destination are equally varied. In broad terms, migrant motivations map closely onto the explanations given for counterurbanisation: Mitchell (2004) notably incorporates migrant motivations into her definition of counterurbanisation and uses a three-fold classification of motivations (see also Simon's (2012) four-fold typology). 'Ex-urbanisation' describes well-to-do city dwellers moving to accessible rural locations but continuing to commute to the city on a daily basis. 'Displaced – urbanisation' refers to those motivated by employment, housing or cost of living considerations. Quite simply this group of low income migrants move to locations where these are less expensive (which so happened to be a rural location). Stockdale (2010) suggests this group may have been displaced by urban gentrification processes. 'Anti-urbanisation' (the classic stereotypical motivation) focuses on residential preferences and

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