Imagery and imaginary of islander identity: Older people and migration in Irish small-island communities

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ABSTRACT

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This article examines the imagery and imaginaries of islander identity and makes an original contribution to the fields of gerontology and nissology. Drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews with 19 older residents of two small-island communities located off the island of Ireland, we address the central roles played by older people in creating and sustaining islander identities. Reflecting both public and private representations of islander identity, the article contrasts an island 'imagery' with an island 'imaginary', resulting in a complex 'imag(in)ery' of islander identity. We explore three main themes. To what extent do older residents of island communities perceive an 'imag(in)ery' of islander identity? In what ways do older islanders contribute to, substantiate or perpetuate the imag(in)ery of the islander identity? Are there alternative imag(in)eries of the islander identity for different groups of older people who live in island communities? Our analysis identified two imag(in)eries of islander identity. An historical islander identity was structured by the shared hardships and enforced self-sufficiency associated with residence in remote communities. Contemporary islander identities are founded on the positively perceived isolation of islands, an historical and cultural sense of belonging, frequent social interaction within cohesive, safe and secure communities, and a persistence of 'traditional' values. Older people were actively engaged in the (re)production of islander identity, such as helping visitors discover their island origins, producing traditional cultural artefacts, passing knowledge of culture down through the generations, and acting to maintain the civic life of the island community. Knowledge of local and traditional skills imbued some older islanders with the ability to perform island-specific symbolic rituals. Our study revealed subtle forms of differentiation between over-arching categories of island residents based on migration histories. In particular, older people's narratives revealed a hierarchy in relation to claims to islander status.

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1. Introduction

Around the coast of the island of Ireland are 365 small islands. However, over the years there has been a decline in the number that are inhabited and at present only 53 have resident populations (Moncada et al., 2010). Islands are characterised by emigration and immigration, but migrational flows need to be balanced to ensure population stability (Connell and King, 1999). As migrational flows represent a necessary characteristic of islands, the construction of islander identity is likely to shift continually and be recreated. Nevertheless, Hay (2006) suggests that 'enough remains constant for the island to persist' (p.24). In this exploratory article, we argue that older people play a crucial role in the creation and

sustainability of islander identities. Furthermore, to date, their contributions and experiences as islanders have been overlooked in both the fields of gerontology and nissology Fig. 1.[1]

This article examines the imagery and imaginaries of islander identity using symbolic interactionism within an ecological framework. We explore the (re)constructions of islander identity and the influence of this identity on people's actions who are 'performing the islander' (adapted from Woods, 2011, p.200). Any collective memory or past must be understood in relation to other such pasts. Therefore, those who were born and raised on islands are likely to construct islander identity differently from migrants who bring different perspectives or gazes to bear — just as differences have been found between the identities of long-term and more recent rural residents in other rural settings (Winterton and

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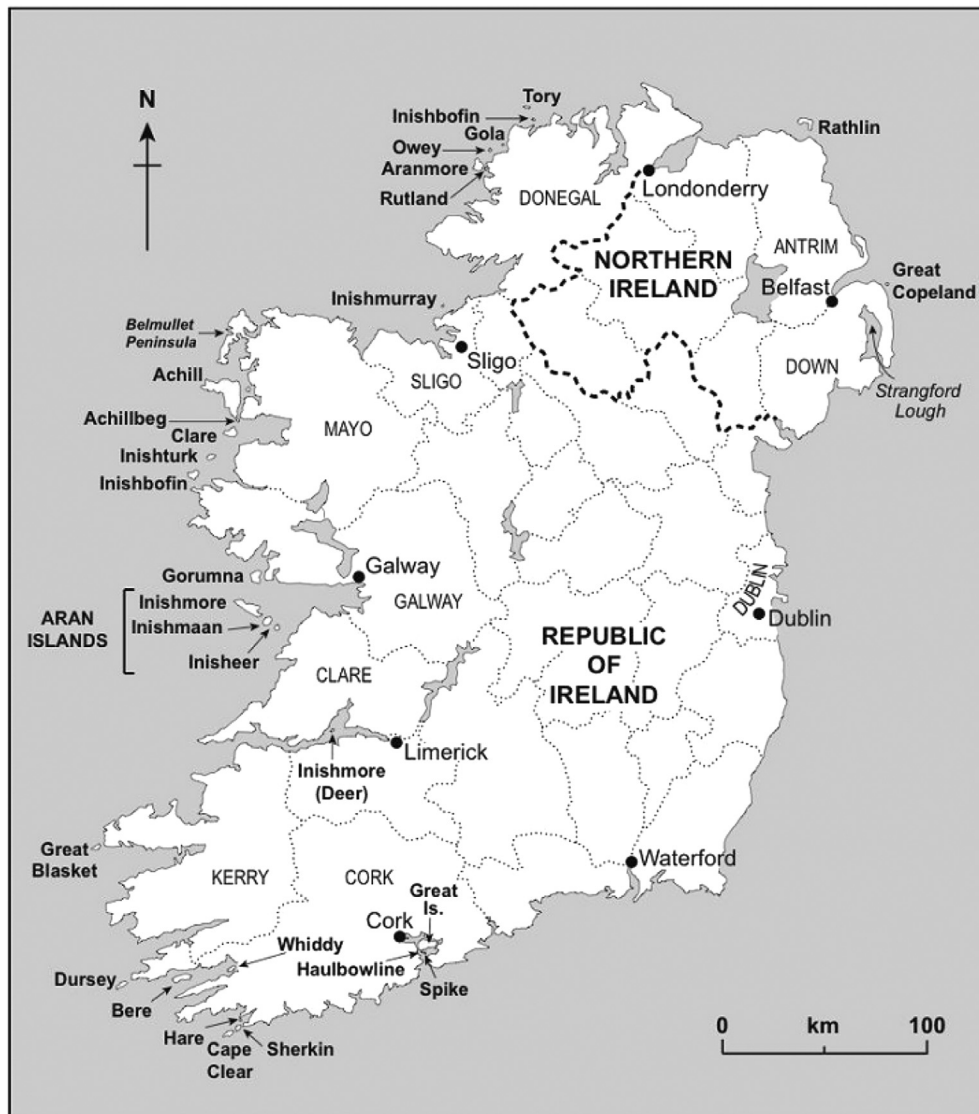[1] The study of islands (McCall, 1994; Hay, 2006).

Fig. 1. Map of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland showing the location of small islands. Reproduced by permission (Royle, 2008).

Warburton, 2012). Islander identities will be institutionalised in interlinked practices, ideas, artefacts, behaviours and values. We will attempt to identify the dominant ideology with regard to islander identity and look for evidence of where this is supported and perpetuated, transformed, superficially adopted or rejected. Thus, we will explore the degree to which older islanders are 'integrated into consensual ways of thinking and behaving' (Wright, 1992, p.214). In particular, we contrast the public presentations or descriptions of islander identity – the island 'imagery' – with personal and private conceptualisations of islander identity – the island 'imaginary'. We use the term imag(in)ery to encapsulate both public and private representations of islander identity. This article explores three main themes:

1. To what extent do older residents of island communities perceive an 'imag(in)ery' of islander identity?
2. In what ways do older islanders contribute to, substantiate or perpetuate the imag(in)ery of the islander identity?
3. Are there alternative imag(in)eries of the islander identity for different groups of older people who live in island communities?

Two theoretical positions (critical human ecology and symbolic interactionism) provide us with the grounds to argue that older people may play an important role in the construction of Irish islanders' identity. From the critical human ecology perspective, place, policy and practice fundamentally impact on the ageing experience, whilst simultaneously individuals shape or adapt their environments (Keating and Phillips, 2008). Our second perspective illustrates the co-production of islander identity and islander behaviour. According to Mead (1934), the construction and continual reconstruction of an islander identity would require members of the community to be reflexive and have a shared understanding of community norms, structures and practices. Thus, we conceptualise islander identity as a set of social norms to which some people adhere (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992; Fast and de Jong Gierveld, 2008). Examining the way that people interact in their everyday lives provides us with a method of understanding the differential impact and interpretation of the social construction of islander identity on the beliefs and behaviours of older islanders.

Some authors suggest that the physical boundaries, geographical isolation and compact socio-political universe of islands contribute to the social construction of an islander identity or