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To cite this article: Marta Bivand Erdal & Rojan Ezzati (2015) 'Where are you from' or 'when did you come'? Temporal dimensions in migrants' reflections about settlement and return, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38:7, 1202-1217, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2014.971041](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.971041)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.971041>



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Published online: 31 Oct 2014.



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‘Where are you from’ or ‘when did you come’? Temporal dimensions in migrants’ reflections about settlement and return

Marta Bivand Erdal and Rojan Ezzati

(Received 3 October 2013; accepted 18 September 2014)

In this article we explore the added value of foregrounding temporal dimensions in migration research. Age at the time of migration, length of stay in the country of settlement and individual life-cycle stages matter for migrants’ settlement and return considerations. However, these factors are rarely put centre stage in analyses. We draw on data from sixty-seven informants with different country backgrounds, who had either immigrated recently, arrived as children, or were born in Norway. We find that the implications of temporal dimensions cut across national and ethnic backgrounds. Age at the time of migration and the relative proportion of life spent in the origin and in the settlement country play an important role in migrants’ considerations about settlement and return; as does being single, a parent with small children, or retired. An approach foregrounding temporal dimensions thus reveals the changeability of considerations over time and highlights similarities and differences beyond ethnicity.

Keywords: time; age; life cycle; migration; settlement; return

Introduction

How migrants relate to their country of origin and country of settlement changes over time, with implications for their considerations about settlement and return. In this article we foreground temporal dimensions and explore what the implications are for migration research.

The idea originates from our thinking about how to operationalize Steven Vertovec’s (2007) ‘super-diversity’ concept for a project on return migration from Norway and the UK: ‘Possibilities and realities of return migration’ (PREMIG). While five of our project’s case studies were defined based on the country of origin of informants, we wanted to include a sixth case study on migrants with different national backgrounds. It was thus necessary to define this case around other variables – but which? We decided to adopt a temporal approach, where Ezzati conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with migrants who had come to Norway either *recently*, in the past seven years, or *as children*, before their fourteenth birthday. Erdal collected data for two of the country-of-origin-specific case studies within the project: people who had migrated, or had parents who had migrated, to Norway from Pakistan and Poland.

During data collection, it became apparent that there were many shared patterns across the two ‘nationally’ defined cases and the ‘super-diversity’ case – along temporal dimensions. Hence the idea for this article, where we pull out informant data for all those who had come to Norway *recently* (in the past seven years) and those who had come *as children* (before their fourteenth birthday) from the Pakistan and Poland cases, and combine them with data from the mixed national background case. In addition, we have included the informants in the Polish and Pakistani cases who were born in Norway to immigrant parents, as complementary to our data on those arriving before their fourteenth birthday. Keeping temporal dimensions homogenous in our joint data set, in this article we ask: how does length of stay in the country of settlement, age at the time of migration and life-cycle stages influence migrants’ and descendants’ considerations about settlement and return?

We begin by discussing the interrelation between time and migration, which has led to the analysis along temporal dimensions in this paper. We proceed with a section presenting the empirical context and data that the article is based on – semi-structured interviews and focus groups in Norway with migrants and descendants of migrants. In the sections that follow we analyse our data along the temporal dimensions of length of stay in the country of settlement, age at the time of migration and individual life-cycle stages, proposing the implications of foregrounding temporal dimensions for research in relation to each of these.

Time and migration

In academic fields such as demography, operationalizing aspects of time for analysis are common. These include a focus on age, time periods, cohorts, births and deaths (Carling 2008). In much research on integration and transnationalism, how time interacts with social and cultural identity formation when it comes to settlement and ties with the origin country is a significant backdrop (see e.g. Carling and Pettersen 2014; Erdal and Oeppen 2013; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Reynolds 2010; Snel, Engbersen, and Leerkes 2006). Time is also central in the changing perspectives on the desire to return (Elchardus et al. 1987 in Cwerner 2001, 12–13). However, despite the multiple ways in which time and migration are intertwined, temporal dimensions are rarely fully incorporated into theorizations of migration processes (Cwerner 2001). Although migration researchers acknowledge temporal dimensions as significant for understanding migration processes, these are often integrated as part of analysis foregrounding other themes, such as identity formation, access to the labour market in countries of settlement, or sustained transnational ties. Exceptions include the study of migrants’ descendants (Levitt 2009) and of the significance of life-cycle stages for migration processes (see e.g. Plane and Jurjevich 2009; Rumbaut 2004). By and large, however, in migration research it is common to sample and analyse data along national dimensions. Studies can, for example, be on migrants with the same country of origin background in a given country of settlement, sometimes in comparison to other countries of origin or settlement. They may focus on questions such as ‘Which migrant groups are the best integrated in *country x*?’ or ‘Are people returning to *country z*, now that the war has ended?’.

While approaches to migration research foregrounding national dimensions obviously provide important insights, they risk overshadowing shared patterns across national backgrounds. In this article we analyse patterns through a temporal lens. With this, our aim is to allow country-of-origin-related factors to emerge as part of the picture, alongside other important characteristics such as gender or class, rather than assuming when and how country-of-origin-related factors are of significance. By using a temporal lens it becomes clear that our informants share many similarities along temporal dimensions, across national origins. Similarly, if we had analysed our data through a gender-focused lens, we would likely find shared patterns across national origins, foregrounding gender-specific elements, but not ignoring the relevance of country of origin, class, or indeed temporal dimensions.

Alternatives to ‘the national’ for sampling purposes, as well as in analysis, are increasingly being tried out, for example focusing on young adult migrants (Fangen, Johansson, and Hammarén 2012) or on territorial units such as neighbourhoods (Alghasi, Eide, and Eriksen 2012; Vertovec 2007). Diversifying sampling units and lenses of analysis in the study of migration processes is a step towards moving beyond ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). The challenges of methodological nationalism have in particular been apparent in the context of problem-oriented perspectives on immigration from the Global South to the Global North in general, and to Europe in particular. However, it is important to situate these debates within the broader field of migration studies, including internal migration, as well as North to South migration, such as retirement migration from the north of Europe to countries like Spain. For instance, sampling based on ‘cohorts of retirees’ from northern Europe residing in the south of Europe brings out similarities (and differences) in transnational ties – across countries of origin (Gustafson 2008). Furthermore, temporal dimensions, such as length of stay, age at the time of migration and life-cycle stages, are as significant for understanding migration processes and outcomes internally as they are internationally, underlining the underestimated similarities between internal and international migration (King and Skeldon 2010).

Time can be measured in a linear way, for instance starting with year of arrival until the present year, which produces a figure for the length of stay in the country of settlement. In its own right, the length of stay is likely to affect migration processes and outcomes, such as settlement and return intentions. Time-related characteristics such as age (Vertovec 2007, 1041) and individuals’ life-cycle stages (Carling 2008) are of great importance for understanding migration processes and outcomes. In this article we show how a temporal approach is particularly fruitful for the study of the changing ways in which migrants and descendants reflect on settlement processes and the possibility of return.

Empirical data and context

Our combined data set includes a total of sixty-seven informants, with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in the two largest cities in Norway (Oslo and Bergen) over the period of February to October 2012. The composition of the data set is similar to that of the migrant population in Norway – many smaller groups with the

same national origin and a few larger ones, migrants of Pakistani and Polish origin constituting two of the largest.

Norway's immigration history has changed significantly over a relatively short period of time (Brochmann and Kjeldstadli 2008), leading to developments that are similar to those seen in traditional immigration countries such as the UK (Vertovec 2007). According to Statistics Norway (Population Statistics 2013), in January 2013, the immigrant population in Norway constituted 593,321 – where 'immigrants' are defined as those born abroad to two foreign-born parents. The great majority of this population has a European background; the largest immigrant groups in 2013 were Poles, Swedes and Lithuanians. An additional 117,144 people are descendants of immigrants – born in Norway to two immigrant parents. In 2013, immigrants and their descendants constituted 14% of the Norwegian population, originating from more than 200 countries. There are major differences in the contexts from which migrants in Norway originate, ranging from regions marked by political instability and insecurity to countries affected by the global financial crisis.

Immigration from Pakistan and Poland represent two major shifts in the Norwegian immigration history. Pakistanis were among the first non-Europeans to arrive to Norway. They came as labour migrants from the 1960s onwards, followed by family reunification from the mid-1970s. The Polish immigration followed a similar pattern following the 2004 EU enlargement, quickly surpassing the Pakistanis as the (until then) largest immigrant group from outside Western Europe. In 2013, the plurality of immigrant descendants in Norway was of Pakistani origin, whereas the plurality of individuals having immigrated to Norway between the ages of zero to twenty-four was of Polish origin (Dzamarija 2010, 15). This variation provides interesting grounds for analysis along temporal dimensions.

Our combined data set includes thirty informants who have immigrated to Norway as adults in the past seven years, twenty who came to Norway during childhood before their fourteenth birthday, and twelve who were born in Norway to two immigrant parents. We recruited most of the informants through our extended networks, making use of snowballing where possible, and adding different recruitment strategies when necessary. A reflective and conscious use of our positionalities was integral (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati 2014), both to recruitment and to conducting interviews and focus groups. We have collected data with great variation in terms of age (ranging from twenty-two to fifty-six years) and life-cycle stage (from single students to married, some with young children). The education level ranges from completed primary school to completed PhD degree. The informants' grounds for immigration were also mixed: refugee status, student migration, family formation, family reunification and labour migration – including high-skilled experts, professionals and workers in low-skilled employment.

When discussing the three temporal dimensions in the sections that follow, we provide the informants' gender, origin country and age at the time of the interview or focus group (referred to in parentheses) to enable the reader to assess the bearing of each on our analysis.

Length of stay in country of settlement

The experiences of the recently arrived migrants in our data highlight the different steps involved in the initial settling process: learning the language, finding a job, getting to know the cultural codes. Each of these steps is experienced differently from one person to another. Learning the language, for example, is not as vital for a professional expatriate who has been hired for a limited period of time as it is for finding a job for instance in a shop or in child care. Some may also experience learning the language as a first step towards feeling more at home in the country in which they have arrived, as illustrated by one of our female informants (twenty-nine) who had migrated from Brazil:

In my first months here, I did feel a bit alienated because I couldn't... figure out what's happening just by listening to people. Then you feel like a stranger, even more. You feel like an alien, so to speak. And then, I was wondering if, once you overcome that barrier and you are fluent, if that changes your perception of being an alien or not.

In the focus group discussion, another female participant (thirty-four), who had migrated from Germany five years earlier and spoke Norwegian well, voiced contrasting views:

I still have this education from another place, and I've grown up in another place, and we did things differently. So sometimes, you just *are* [a stranger] because... you've grown up in a different society. But that doesn't mean I don't feel at home or something, it just means that I'm doing things in a different way.

The interaction between the two focus group participants illustrates the changing ideas of belonging over time. The first informant, who had spent about a year in Norway, is hoping to feel less like a stranger once she has learned Norwegian. The second informant has, based on her own experience, come to the conclusion that she does feel 'different', despite speaking the language and feeling at home in Norway.

As recently arrived migrants go through different steps of the initial settling process, individual experiences shape their thoughts on settlement and return. However, this does not necessarily result in a final decision to stay or to return. Migrants weigh the pros and cons of settlement and return in constantly evolving reflections on opportunities and a sense of belonging 'here' and 'there'. A male informant (thirty-one) told us that when he first moved to join his Norwegian girlfriend, they both thought that they would move back to Australia after a year or two. Four years later, they had no immediate plan of moving back. He explained that they both had jobs that they liked, had established new networks of friends in Norway and were 'happy here at the moment'. While he described how they still fitted into their old circle of friends in Australia when they went back to visit, he could see how that might change over time as both parties continued to live their lives in geographically distanced places. He explained that if they were to move back, 'there would obviously be challenges in trying to fit in', especially when being used to 'the Norwegian working life and culture, which is similar, but different'. With this, the informant brought up factors that change over time in his (and his girlfriend's) considerations of returning to Australia, namely

growing apart from their networks in Australia, reinforcing new networks in Norway and becoming increasingly accustomed to Norwegian working life and culture.

A focus group discussion with recently arrived Polish construction workers further exemplifies the fluidity of migration decisions: while these men worked under the assumption that they were in Norway temporarily, they did not make a decision to leave, or to stay. One man (thirty-one) explained: 'I'm going back at the end of the year... It's always "till the summer", "till end of the year", "just for another year"...' In this focus group it was evident that this state of limbo was perpetuated by a combination of lack of opportunities at a professional and a personal level. They lacked sufficient professional opportunities in Norway and simultaneously they lacked possibilities to move their family to Norway. The latter was either due to the men's own hesitance or their wives' unwillingness to move to Norway, in some cases added to by other family circumstances. These men described their position as similar to that of sailors: temporary sojourners always returning to port, but leaving again each time. While return was the only option that they were considering, they did not actually intend to realize permanent return in a short-term perspective.

In many cases, however, families do join recent arrivals in Norway. Some had always seen the planned short-term migration as a possible first step towards family migration. Others had not previously considered this option but as a result of distance between family members, as well as economic realities, the nature of the migration project had changed over time. With families settling, property being bought and children integrating into the school system, return becomes a more distant prospect, postponed into the future. A woman (forty-four) who had migrated from Poland six years prior to the interview explained her thoughts on return:

We have invested so much here now, my husband has a good job, I have a job, and our sons are doing well at school... No, we aren't going back anytime soon. Our lives are here now. Maybe sometime in the future, you know...

This quote exemplifies how initial return intentions may be postponed 'until the children grow older', 'until I retire', 'until my grandchildren are old enough to travel with me'. It may well be a matter of 'staying here for now, and see what the future brings'. The *possibility* of return is very important to some, not least at an emotional level (Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugil, and Polit 2005). Thus, many migrants do not rule it out. In a study in Norway, for example, six out of ten surveyed migrants and migrant descendants either intended to return or were 'undecided' (Blom and Henriksen 2008).

As the above indicates, migrants' reflections on the possibility of return – their 'return intentions' –are ambivalent and change over time (Hughes and Allen 2010; Jones and de la Torre 2011). Initial return intentions often do not match with actual return migration behaviour (Cassarino 2004). The famous phrase 'the myth of return' (Anwar 1979) has proven valid for migrant populations both from non-conflict and conflict settings.

Previous studies have shown that return migration is typically more likely to happen for migrants with a shorter length of stay than for those with a longer length of stay in the country of settlement. These studies suggest that the chance of migrants

returning or moving to another country is greater a couple of years after migration, and for a few years, perhaps up to ten years of stay, in the country of settlement (Tysse and Keilman 1998; Van Liempt 2011). As time passes, for most migrants return becomes a more distant prospect linked to, for example, retirement (Hunter 2011) or extraordinary situations. Even when permanent return is out of the question, saying so can be emotionally challenging, as reflected in research on return intentions among migrants (Erdal 2012).

Analysis along temporal dimensions brings out the changeability of migrants' return and settlement considerations over time. The longer you stay, the more invested you become in the settlement country, and the more distant plans for return to the origin country become. For considerations about settlement and return, a length of stay of one, three or five years may produce dramatically different outcomes. However, these are not always linear processes; considerations about settlement and return can always take new turns. Yet, the fact that length of stay affects settlement and return considerations is true across different countries of origin, for men and women, of different professions. The implication is that the length of time spent in the settlement country may well matter more than the individual's country of origin. The same applies for the significance of age at the time of migration, as we explain further below.

Age at the time of migration

In our data we see that those who arrive to the country of settlement later in life are more vulnerable to the adaptation process, compared to both those arriving as children and to descendants of migrants. The older migrants' reflections on return vary, but the idea of it often remains important at an emotional level.

A young man (twenty-eight) explained with reference to his parents and grandparents who had also migrated to Norway:

After all, they [the older generations] grew up there, we didn't. ... She [my grandmother] has lived in Bosnia for sixty years, while I lived there for seven. So of course it influences her to a much greater degree, it's much more difficult to let go of it and change when you're sixty when you come here.

Similarly, a woman (forty-two) who came from Poland in her mid-thirties reflected about how she still felt that Poland was home, while her children, now aged nineteen and sixteen, were more at home in Norway. For her, the important formative years of youth and of establishing a family were in Poland, and memories of Poland were with her, as was a clear longing for her friends and family. This echoes the reflections that a man (thirty-four) of Pakistani origin had about his father, who had come to Norway in the 1970s as a young man. The father, now retired, lived in Pakistan six months a year and in Norway for the remaining six, finally being able to spend more time in Pakistan and in his childhood home and village. For the son, Pakistan was in some ways an important place, but not somewhere he would consider living.

When migrating at a young age, a time span of a few years can make a major difference. For example, a woman (twenty-six) who had left Russia at the age of six

explained that, growing up, she hardly had any friends with a migrant background. By contrast, her older brother, who had arrived when he was eighteen (a few years after her), only had Russian-speaking friends in Norway. She explained: 'He was pretty much grown up by the time he came here. So he much more fitted into Russian groups.' After a few years in Norway, her brother moved back to Russia. She herself had been determined that she would never want to move back to Russia since she visited when she was fourteen (the only time since she had left) and realized that she 'wasn't Russian anymore'.

For the child migrants who had memories of living in their countries of origin, the importance of *when* they came as opposed to *where* they came from was particularly evident. They had their own versions of stories to tell, even if from a child's perspective. Their stories included escaping from a conflict setting or remaining in the origin country while their father worked abroad, as well as first impressions of the country of settlement. In some cases these experiences made feelings towards both their country of origin and country of settlement ambivalent. One woman (forty-two) described what she referred to as an identity crisis at the age of fourteen, three years after she left Vietnam. When confronted with some discriminatory episodes in Norway, she started questioning why she had left Vietnam. Based on memories of life in Vietnam, she started thinking that she would prefer to live in her 'own country'. But when she returned to visit at the age of eighteen, she realized that she would never want to live in Vietnam again:

You have a completely different vision of things; you have grown up in Norway, learned another culture. So I don't feel as part of the [Vietnamese] culture, even though the language is there. I understand and I'm not different, body-wise and language-wise. But I feel... I simply feel like I'm in a foreign country when I'm down there.

Similarly, a woman (twenty-two) who had emigrated from Morocco at the age of nine had experienced difficulties entering the labour market in Norway, which she linked to her ethnic background. However, while she described a feeling of 'coming home' on her visits to Morocco, they were also a reminder that she could never live there. The access to education, work opportunities, gender equality and freedom that she was used to in Norway were simply not compatible to an imagined life there. After these reminders over a few weeks, the feeling of 'coming home' was equally present on her return to Norway.

Following from the above, we see a continuum where the older you are at the time of migration, the more attachments you have to your country of origin. Depending on 'whether they immigrated during early, middle, or older adulthood', adult migrants' settlement processes can vary significantly, not least due to the life-cycle situation that each individual is in (Rumbaut 2004, 1166). The older one is at the time of arrival, the shorter time one has spent in the settlement country relative to the origin country, and by implication, the more memories from, attachments to and relationships in, the origin country. By contrast, the younger at the time of migration, the more likely one is to gain life-shaping experiences in the country of settlement (Henriksen 2009). Hence, the relative proportion of life spent in the country of origin versus settlement has consequences for transnational ties, return intentions and settlement processes

(Rumbaut 2004). This is apparent in that migrants arriving as children, often referred to as the '1.5 generation' (Kasinitz et al. 2002) and descendants of migrants generally have weaker transnational ties than adult migrants (Reynolds 2010), or in some cases different kinds of transnational ties. Our analysis along the age continuum illustrates that how old the person is at the time of migration is important in reflections about settlement and return. Age matters across national and ethnic background, as well as across gender, class and religion. Age at the time of migration is a fixed characteristic. Although relative proportions of life spent in the country of origin and settlement change, how old you were at migration, your memories, experiences and relationships prior to migration remain with you.

More so than older migrants, migrants arriving as children, as well as descendants of migrants, feel at home in their country of settlement, although their sense of belonging and identity often remains dual and in some cases ambivalent (Erdal 2013; Kivisto and La Vecchia-Mikkola 2013). While we find significant variations in adult migrants' reflections on settlement and return, the pattern among those who came as children or were born in Norway is clear: despite emotional attachment and varying transnational ties to their country of origin, there is generally no intention of permanent return. Having spent their entire or most of their lives in Norway, 'returning' to a life that they are no longer, or never have been, accustomed to, is difficult to imagine. Arguably, then, the inclusion of migrants who arrived as children and descendants of migrants in the study of return intentions stems more from a 'return bias' than it does from empirical patterns of return. Return migration among children of migrants is relatively rare. 'Ethnic' or 'ancestral' return, as in for example the cases of the Japanese-Brazilian (Tsuda 2003) or of the Greek-Cypriot, are among the exceptions, referred to as 'counter-diasporic' migration (King and Christou 2010).

Given the differences along the continuum of age and their links to considerations on settlement and return, we question the common distinction made between migrants arriving as children and descendants of migrants, implicit in the focus on the 'second generation' in much migration research. All children immigrating to Norway before the age of six would enter the education system from the first grade, just like any children born in Norway. For older children, integrating into the school system is significant for their future prospects as part of social adaptation (Michail 2009). Children and youth adapt and integrate differently from adults as they tend to make new friends and learn the language more quickly. These are experiences that both migrants arriving as children and descendants of migrants share. Frequently they are neither seen, nor do they feel, completely as 'migrants' or as 'locals'. Our informants shared, to different degrees, experiences of in-betweenness in their everyday lives and in their sense of belonging. We thus find that age at migration and whether children are old enough to have independent memories of their lives in the origin country, provides better opportunities for distinction than differentiating between those arriving as children ('migrants') and descendants of migrants ('second generation'). This is a common-sense realization, yet one that is not accounted for in the ways in which statistics on immigrant populations are reported, nor in a systematic way in policy approaches to societal inclusion. Conceptually, the blurring boundaries between 'migrants' and 'second generation' also challenge the ways in which categories are used in migration research.

Age at the time of migration interacts with the temporal dimension that we discuss in the next section, namely life-cycle stages.

Life-cycle stages

When we in our seven focus groups asked participants to write down three to five keywords on important factors in their considerations of settlement and return, and range these according to degree of importance, 'family', 'partner/spouse' and 'work' were among the top three factors. The same factors, which are directly or indirectly linked to life-cycle stages, recurred in the individual interviews that we conducted. It was clear that different life-cycle stages and events – such as birth of children, children of school age or elderly parents – are key factors in migrants' considerations. For instance, one woman (twenty-eight) explained that while she could imagine living abroad for a while, whether in Russia (her country of origin) or elsewhere, she thought that it would be difficult now that she had her fiancé to coordinate with. A man (forty-eight) explained how his plans had changed since he came from Poland to Norway as his children arrived and started going to school in Norway, then reached critical stages in their education and were making choices for their future.

As the previous example illustrates, considerations of settlement and return become more complex when children enter the picture. For male informants who had left behind young children in order to work in Norway, the hardest thing about migration, and a key reason why return was their one and only plan, was being away from their children. For one young couple whom we spoke with, the very question of having children produced reflections about settlement and return. The couple, in their early thirties, told us that they would wait until they returned to Poland to have children. They wanted to have family close by and a familiar environment where people spoke their native language. This couple had a previous return attempt behind them, after which they re-emigrated, this time to Norway. Their considerations about having children and about settlement and return led this couple to postpone their stated desire to have children. They left having children contingent on a return that they were planning but that they did not know if they would go through with in the near future.

Another Polish couple in their mid-thirties told us about their great fear of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (*Barnevernet*), which they were afraid might take their young child from them. This fear was echoed by several other informants, with different country of origin backgrounds, with reference to cases in the media where the Norwegian child services had taken children of immigrants into care. For these particular couples, return considerations were closely tied to concern for their children's safety and prospects for a good upbringing in Norway. By and large, the impression was that a childhood in Norway was as good as in their origin country, but the fear and mistrust towards the Norwegian state overshadowed this. Other couples did not bring up such concerns, but emphasized a desire for children to speak their parents' native language and know 'their culture'.

For others, returning in order to be surrounded by the language and culture that they were born into did not seem realistic. A woman (twenty-eight) told us that living in Iran (her origin country) seemed far-fetched given the political situation there. But she and her husband (who descends from Turkey) had discussed spending parts of the year in

Turkey in the distant future, during retirement. But moving from Norway as long as their children were small was not an option. Assessing her own attachment to Norway, 'despite not being born here', she found it difficult to imagine that her children would be willing to leave and able to fully function in a different environment. Ruling out return while the children were small and keeping 'return during retirement' as an option is parallel to the changing ideas about the migration project that we previously discussed. One man (twenty-eight) explained that for his parents, at the age of fifty, returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina is not an option. As he put it, returning would require them to 'start from scratch; again'. However, in his assessment, they could possibly consider moving back upon retirement: 'or "moving there" is perhaps exaggerating a bit.... that you have an address here, but you are there a lot'.

Growing older comes with a greater number of obligations, in some cases towards the family that one was born into. For those who have parents in their country of origin, returning in order to attend to elderly parents is a significant and possible future scenario. This was particularly a concern for the future among those of our informants who either had no siblings left in the country of origin or no siblings at all. It was a lived experience for a female informant (forty-three) who had spent eight years in Pakistan looking after her mother-in-law before 'returning' with her children to Norway. Her example underlines the fact that return, as much as migration, is a reversible action. If a migrant can return, he or she can also re-migrate, regardless of what the intentions at various stages in the process might have been.

A final aspect of life-cycle stages with regard to return migration is that of funeral considerations (Mazzucato et al. 2006). For some elderly migrants, nostalgia towards their origin country can be seen in parallel with the more general nostalgia towards their childhood. The desire to be buried close to parents and siblings contrasts with the fact that many of the same migrants have decided against return because they have children and grandchildren living in the country of settlement. When death occurs, close family members are faced with the practical issues of funeral rituals and burials, involving people and places across transnational social fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). A man in his forties told us how his father wanted to bury his mother in Pakistan. However, he and his brother, along with their children, had convinced the father to bury the mother in Norway, close to her children and grandchildren. Despite a clear sense of ambivalence, his father agreed to this and the funeral took place in Norway.

As the above suggests, interactions between return intentions and life-cycle stages are in part related to the number of people who 'depend' on the person in question, at different stages of life. Before establishing a family, one has greater freedom in choosing where to live. This changes when one establishes a family, or reunites with a spouse and family from the origin country. Children grow up, and later grandchildren are born, altering the balance of attachments to people in different places. For both migrants and descendants of migrants, life-cycle stages influence transnational ties, as concerns about own children's identity and cultural heritage may strengthen or weaken those ties (Levitt 2009). But only in rare cases does so-called 'ethnic return' take place (see e.g. Duval 2004; Tsuda 2003). In contrast, elderly parents left in the country of origin constitute an important pull-factor for migrants with regard to return intentions, but in these cases it is rare that (permanent) return takes place (Baldock

2000). Many migrants plan to return to their country of origin upon retirement (Warnes and Williams 2006). However, when it is time to retire, it is common not to return permanently, but to circulate between the country of origin and settlement, with shorter or longer periods in each (Hunter 2011). Such circulation is often connected with seasonal and climatic considerations (Conway and Rork 2011), similar to the case of retired non-migrants from northern Europe who spend parts of the year in southern European countries such as Spain (Gustafson 2008).

Migrants take different aspects of their lives into consideration when reflecting on the possibility of return versus settlement. Many of these aspects are linked to life-cycle stages and include the upbringing of children, taking care of elderly parents in the origin country, the idea of return or circulation during retirement, and, finally, thinking about funeral arrangements. Our data illustrate that changing obligations to 'significant others' in relation to different life-cycle stages affect considerations of settlement and return, and it does so across national and ethnic backgrounds. Life-cycle stages are significant markers of change in perspective for people in all societies. But in migration research in general, and with regard to settlement and return considerations in particular, the salience of life-cycle stages, above and beyond that of national backgrounds, is surprisingly absent. There are some exceptions to this, including research on the considerations of elderly labour migrants in France, who had planned for retirement migration but who saw things differently after retirement (Hunter 2011).

Conclusion

An analysis of settlement and return considerations that foregrounds temporal dimensions clearly shows that questioning dominant categories, such as the national, can lead to important insights. Some of these insights are intuitive and based on common sense, yet their implications are rarely drawn into methodological development or theoretical elaborations in migration research.

National background obviously did have an effect on our informants' responses about settlement and return considerations, as time interacts with a range of other dimensions such as the political situation or career prospects in the country of origin or settlement. However, their considerations of staying in Norway or returning to their country of origin predominantly had common-ground reasoning, across very different national contexts, such as Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Germany, Morocco, Russia and Vietnam.

Foregrounding the temporal dimensions has highlighted the changeability of settlement and return considerations across informants' countries of origin. Having school-going children in Norway, for instance, was a factor far outweighing the importance of economic or political circumstances in origin countries as different as Iran, Pakistan and Poland; much as having elderly parents in need of care in the country of origin was something that could be the decisive factor for a long-term return migratory move. Furthermore, a temporal approach highlights the reversibility of migration. If a migrant can return, he or she can also re-migrate, regardless of what the intentions at various stages in the process might have been.

Our analysis illustrates some of the reasons why the longer migrants spend in the settlement country, the less likely they are to return to their country of origin. Rather than being an inevitable and unidirectional development, this is related both to life-cycle stages in an individual's life and to where 'significant others' are located. As part of the settlement process, migrants often establish or reunite with family, make friends, invest in children's education and buy property in the country of settlement. Foregrounding the temporal dimensions highlights generational differences, as the relative proportion of life spent in the origin versus settlement country has consequences for thoughts on settlement and return. The relative proportion of time spent in the country of settlement versus origin changes over the life course and is influenced by particular life-changing events. Yet, the significance of memories and attachments in the country of origin – at the time of migration – remains. Drawing on an analysis of migrants' reflections on settlement and return that foregrounds temporal dimensions leads us to question taken-for-given categories in migration research. We find that considerations of settlement and return vary along a continuum, where the distinction between 'migrant' and 'second generation' is often blurred. What makes more of a difference are the memories or attachments that one has to countries of origin and settlement. Thus, we find that the degree of memories and attachments provides a better distinction for analysis than one between 'migrants' and 'second generation'.

Migrants and their descendants' return considerations are evidently multilayered and in process, rather than static. An approach placing temporal dimensions centre stage adds to the understanding of individual lived experiences. These experiences change and develop with the passing of time, influencing thoughts on the possibility of return and the nature of settlement processes. In conclusion, then, both the questions of *where* migrants are from and *when* they came are relevant in considerations of settlement and return. Despite the inherent complexities, analyses of migration processes may benefit from adopting an intersectional approach, which includes and considers national and ethnic backgrounds, along with class, gender, religion and temporal dimensions, as appropriate to the given research themes. With regard to settlement and return intentions, for instance, why should we assume that coming from the same origin country should matter more – as an explanatory factor – than gender, or education, or profession? And would the same be the case should analyses of the same kinds of intentions be pursued among internal migrants within a country? The shared patterns that we find across national origins of informants in this article generate hypotheses to be explored in future qualitative and quantitative research, specifically on settlement and return intentions, but also more generally within migration studies.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who shared their thoughts and experiences with us in interviews and focus groups, as well as all those who have contributed with input at various stages, most notably Elin Berstad Mortensen and Lynn P. Nygaard, in addition to the PREMIG team.

Funding

The PREMIG project (<http://www.prio.org/premig>) is funded by the Research Council of Norway [grant number 202499].

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