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On: 19 Oct 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315753041.ch3>

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Published online on: 19 May 2016

How to cite :- Caitríona Ní Laoire, Aileen Stockdale. 19 May 2016, *Migration and the Life Course in Rural Settings from*: Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies Routledge

Accessed on: 19 Oct 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315753041.ch3>

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Migration and the Life Course in Rural Settings

Caitríona Ní Laoire and Aileen Stockdale

Introduction

It is increasingly acknowledged that the preferences and propensities for living in, or moving from, rural settings vary across the life course. These reflect the complex interplay between economic, cultural, social and lifestyle factors evident in several life domains (work, family, health, leisure), which in turn give rise to complex sets of competing influences, considerations and motivations that cut across life course stages and transitions. There is, therefore, an emerging interest in how life events (such as education, employment, family formation, empty nest, retirement, widowhood, increasing frailty or ill health) intersect with different rural migration flows and processes. In this chapter we adopt such an approach. We begin by conceptualising migration and the life course, before progressing to use a life course lens to review contemporary rural migration processes. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the value of a life course approach to better understand the dynamics of contemporary rural migration processes and change.

Conceptualising migration and the life course

In the simplest of terms, '[m]igration involves the movement of a person (a *migrant*) between two places for a certain period of time. The problem is defining how far someone needs to move and for how long' (Boyle, Halfacree & Robinson, 1998, p. 34). The distance moved distinguishes migration from residential and daily/weekly mobility. The latter includes short-term movement around a fixed address, while residential mobility commonly involves short intra-area changes of address; migration, by contrast, is associated with longer inter-area moves. The geographical unit of investigation may include movement within and/or between neighbourhoods, settlements, regions and nations. Here, we define migration as a residential move which has crossed a geographical boundary. By doing so, we include the internal and international migration of individual persons and households whose associated origin or destination is rural.

According to Feijten, Hooimeijer and Mulder (2008), whether or not a desire to move is realised is determined by financial resources, restrictions (such as the distance to work or family ties), and the opportunities and constraints at the preferred destination (such as the availability of housing and employment). The determinants of migration, however, will not remain

constant over the course of an individual's life and their variability affects the likelihood, direction (to or from rural settings) and distance of a move. For example, employment-motivated moves are more likely over long distances while housing considerations frequently result in short relocations. Moreover, 'the power of labour market stimuli is found to decline with migrant age whilst the relative importance of amenity and housing effects shows a corresponding increase' (Millington, 2000, p. 521). This knowledge helps to explain rural youth out-migration (for employment) and the in-migration of amenity-seeking older age cohorts. Accordingly 'migration decision-making is mainly driven by life-course events and by perceived opportunities in several life domains' (Kley & Mulder, 2010, p. 90).

Traditionally the likelihood of moving was related to age, with the age-specific migration schedule (Rossi, 1955) well known: migration peaks among younger age groups with smaller spikes evident later in life. Nevertheless, there have been calls for migration research to replace this age focus with life course stages and a continuum of life course stages specifically (Geist & McManus, 2008; Plane & Jurjevich, 2009). Among previous generations specific life events occurred within particular age parameters: today there is a greater fluidity within and between life course stages. The average age at which a woman conceives her first child has risen, and early/flexible retirement options mean that retirement is no longer the abrupt life course stage only undertaken at the state pension age. Life events, therefore, rather than age affect the likelihood of moving. Sandefur and Scott (1981) observed that the rates of migration decrease significantly as family size increases. This is because the cost of a move rises with the number of persons in the family, and the presence of additional members means that more ties must be broken at the place of origin and established at the destination. Bures (2009) alleges that there is a greater likelihood of making a long-distance move as the age of the youngest child at home increases, and Wulff, Champion and Lobo (2010) calculate that 'empty nest' status confers a mobility premium.

Different rural migration flows (into the rural, within the rural, and from the rural), therefore, emerge depending on the perceived ability of the rural to provide opportunities for individuals and households in different life domains and at different life course stages. Research adopting a life course approach has utilised mixed (Hardill & Monk, 2015) and biographical (Ní Laoire, 2008) methods. Biographical studies, in particular, help in nuancing understandings of the ways in which life and migration events intersect. They reveal how factors (beyond age) shape, and are shaped by, migration decision making and experiences.

Migration and the life course in rural settings

In this section we offer a critical 'state of knowledge' review of how life course events intersect with different rural migration flows. This draws on an extensive literature pertaining to the global north.

In-migration

Since the 1970s, rural in-migration has largely been conceptualised within a counter-urbanisation framework. It has been defined as 'a process of population deconcentration; it implies a movement from a state of more concentration to a state of less concentration' (Berry, 1976, p. 17), and 'is deemed to be the prevailing tendency when the distribution of population is shifting from larger to smaller places' (Champion, 1989, p. 32). Despite the myriad of definitions that have since appeared in the literature (Mitchell, 2004), counter-urbanisation and its associated rural in-migration was observed throughout the global north: in the UK (Perry,

Dean & Brown, 1986), Europe (Vining & Kontuly, 1978; Fielding, 1982), North America (Beale, 1975; Berry, 1976; Vining & Strauss, 1977) and Australia (Hugo & Smailes, 1985).

Rural in-migration is frequently stereotyped as involving the long-distance movement of wealthy, middle-aged and retired persons from metropolitan and city regions to scenically attractive rural and coastal locations in search of an improved quality of life or rural idyll. Such migration is linked with images and representations of the rural, where the rural idyll 'presents happy, healthy and problem-free images of rural life safely nestling with both a close social community and a contiguous natural environment' (Clope & Milbourne, 1992: 359). It is often couched in anti-urban (crime, congestion, house prices, lacking a sense of community) and pro-rural (better environment, tranquil lifestyle) terms (Halliday & Coombes, 1995). Bolton and Chalkley (1990) and Bijker, Haartsen and Strijker (2012), nevertheless, make an important distinction between the reasons for moving (which commonly relate to lifestyle, personal or environmental factors) and the choice of destination (which is more often about jobs and house prices). The household is the level at which family/couple decision making occurs with net household (rather than individual) gain assumed to drive migration behaviour (Mincer, 1978). Inevitably there may be a lack of consensus between partners on both the desirability of a move and the preferred destination: negotiation and compromise will be necessary (Cooke, 2008). Children (if present in the household) may, or may not, also be consulted (Bushin, 2009). Specific aspects of the rural deemed attractive are identified by McGranahan (1999) and van Dam, Heins and Elbersen (2002). These vary at different stages of the life course. Nevertheless, 'the stereotypical rural in-migrant is routinely portrayed as someone who escapes the harried city for a more "down-to-earth" way of life' (Grimsrud, 2011, p. 642). Some have moved 'back to the land' (Halfacree, 2001), 'back to the water' (Smith, 2007) or 'to the sunbelt' (Brown & Glasgow, 2008) with rural in-migration commonly thought of as amenity (Abrams, Gosnell, Gill & Klepeis, 2012) and lifestyle migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009).

Notwithstanding this dominant counter-urbanisation narrative, a key point is that contemporary rural in-migration now involves a more diverse set of processes and consequently multiple migration flows, groups, motivations and destinations. It is no longer solely thought of as an urban to rural migration flow (leading largely to scenically attractive destinations) or an exclusively internal migration phenomenon. Instead, other in-migration flows have been observed: to less popular rural (Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker, 2013) and fringe areas (Andersen, 2011), from one rural area to another (Bijker & Haartsen, 2012; Stockdale, 2015), stepped moves (Champion, 2005), return migration to rural areas (Ní Laoire, 2007) and including international mobility (Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014). Examples of the latter include Dutch (Eimermann, Lundmark & Muller, 2012; Eimermann, 2013) migration to rural Sweden, retirement migration from the UK to Europe (King, Warnes & Williams, 2000; Benson, 2010) and from the United States to Mexico (Sunil, Rojas & Bradley, 2007), and international labour migration (Jentsch & Simard, 2009). A wider range of migrant groups are also participating, in contrast to the perceived middle-class and retired in-migrant dominance of the past. Australian high amenity rural areas are especially attractive to the creative classes (Argent, Tonts, Jones & Holmes, 2013) and artists have been observed moving into the Canadian countryside (Mitchell, Bunting & Piccioni, 2004). Those of working age (Bijker & Haartsen, 2012), on relatively low incomes (Hugo & Bell, 1998; Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker, 2012) and ethnic groups (Johnson & Lichter, 2012) have also been observed.

In addition, rural in-migration involves multiple drivers. Erickson (1976) and Keeble and Tyler (1995) allege that people have followed jobs into rural areas. Similarly, Dahms and McComb (1999, p. 144) report that '[n]ew mobility and economic opportunity have encouraged moves to areas providing both amenities and employment', while others show that rural in-

migrants create jobs which in turn attract further migrants (Beyers & Nelson, 2000). Moreover, whereas quality of life values have long been recognised as an important motivation to explain a residential move to rural areas, Johnson and Rasker (1995) and Bosworth and Willett (2011) point to their importance in the business location decision making of rural business owners too. And, in contrast to the pro-rural motivations that have dominated many rural in-migration studies, Gkartziou (2013) observes a crisis driven counter-urbanisation triggered by unemployment at origin. Similarly, Grimsrud (2011) finds that in-migration is strongly motivated by family relations and economic factors rather than pro-rural considerations.

Taking a life course approach helps to explain this contemporary diversity of rural in-flows, groups and motivations. Until recently scant attention has been paid to life course dimensions. This is now changing with the emergence of a literature which confirms rural settings as popular destinations for migrants experiencing different life events who accordingly are drawn into the rural at multiple life course stages.

Union and family formation life course stages have been observed to increase the likelihood of moving to a rural setting (Courgeau, 1989; Lindgren, 2003). Kulu's (2008) Austrian study, for example, shows that the birth of a first child triggers housing and environment-related residential moves and includes migration from cities to rural areas, with the likelihood of such a move increasing significantly with the birth of a second and third child. Such migration is linked to the availability and affordability (relative to cities) of family housing, a perception of rural areas being safe places to bring up children, and that rural areas possess a sense of community which is conducive to family life. It may also include a move to exclusive rural school catchment areas (Smith & Higley, 2012). Working-class families too at the union and family formation life course stage move to what Bijker, Haartsen and Strijker (2013) call 'less-popular' rural locations. These young families emphasise the social qualities of the rural setting (friendliness, lots of things going on) so that 'it is useful to distinguish between the physical and social aspects of the rural to explain moving to different types of rural areas' (Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker, 2013, p. 589) by different migrant groups and at different life course stages.

A move may also be undertaken in preparation for a forthcoming life event (Michielin & Mulder, 2008) such as starting a family (Kulu, 2008) or retirement. Bures (1997), Stockdale (2006) and Stockdale and MacLeod (2013) identify a retirement transition life course stage whereby the migration behaviours of pre-retirement age migrants are similar to those of retirees. An impending retirement may correspond with an empty-nest life course stage. Freed from dependent responsibilities and possessing a degree of affluence (for example, an existing mortgage may have been paid) it may signal a realisation for 'a place in the country' (Hardill, 2006) or 'dreaming of a smallholding' (Blekesaune, Haugen & Villa, 2010). For others at this stage a move permits the release of property equity through downsizing (Stockdale, 2014). Indeed, Haas and Serow (2002) allege that the baby-boom generation is more likely to move on retirement than previous cohorts. Skelley (2004) expects them to be amenity-seeking migrants and, therefore, favour rural destinations (Brown & Glasgow, 2008; Cromartie & Nelson, 2009). Conflicting evidence is provided by Cribier (2005) who observes declining retirement migration among Parisians. While she offers a growth in second home ownership as a possible explanation, others have associated a component of rural retirement in-migration with a permanent move to a previous holiday or second home (Muller & Marjavaara, 2012). Migration is also influenced by earlier residential experiences. Han and Moen (1999, p. 197) explain that 'to understand behaviour at any one life stage requires knowledge of prior transitions and trajectories', and Stockdale, MacLeod and Philip (2013) amply demonstrate the connections between life course stages when it comes to rural migration decision making. This helps to explain return migration – either to a specific place

(Lundholm, 2012) or 'to the rural' (Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker, 2012) – as a component of rural in-migration. Finally, there is evidence of a further move by rural in-migrants at the time of increasing illness, personal frailty and widowhood (that is, at later life course stages). According to Wenger (2001) migrants who have moved into rural areas, especially if they have left potential later life family and friend support systems behind, move from the countryside to larger villages and small towns. In other words, later-life migration is to destinations possessing the necessary housing types, services, facilities and support networks for a comfortable old age. Elsewhere, older rural in-migrants are found to combine amenity and proximity to family motivations in selecting destination communities (Brown & Glasgow, 2008), thereby negating a future move.

Out-migration

The association of rural out-migration with youth and the young-adulthood phase of the life course is well-established (Easthope & Gabriel, 2006; Gibson & Argent, 2008; Thissen, Droogleever Fortuijn, Strijker & Haartsen, 2010; Nugin, 2014). Research across a range of diverse contexts has identified that young adults are those most likely to migrate from rural areas and those who comprise the largest proportion of rural outflows (Stockdale, 2002b; Domina, 2006; Argent & Walmsley, 2008). While this is clearly related to age, it is more specifically related to life transitions typically from youth to adulthood, and from childhood/youth to work, education and independence. The necessity of moving from rural to urban areas for work and educational opportunities reflects the ongoing marginalisation of many rural regions in the context of global capitalist processes of urbanisation and capital accumulation, which have resulted in disinvestment and declining employment opportunities in many rural regions. Lack of employment continues to be a major explanatory factor for rural out-migration, as traditional rural sectors such as agriculture experience declining labour demands, and young people migrate to urban centres for employment reasons (Domina, 2006; Bell et al., 2009).

Rural areas also tend to lack higher education opportunities, with research in different contexts finding that higher education is a key motivation for rural out-migration among young adults (Domina, 2006; Corbett, 2007b). Stockdale (2002a) has highlighted that education may provide an initial impetus for youth out-migration, and that, subsequently, a lack of suitable employment opportunities in the rural place of origin is a factor mitigating against return, thus reinforcing the out-migration trend. In particular, the lack of graduate or professional employment opportunities in rural areas has been highlighted as a key factor. As remote or economically marginal rural regions continue to be dominated by agricultural, manual and low-skill service sectors of employment, the out-migration (and staying away) of young people is reinforced by the lack of opportunities for graduate employment. Corbett (2007b, p. 20) refers to this as the 'migration imperative of rural schooling', arguing that rural education prepares rural youth for social and spatial mobility that is inevitably about leaving rural areas. 'Social mobility increasingly presupposes geographical mobility, especially in rural areas' (Thissen, Droogleever Fortuijn, Strijker & Haartsen, p. 428).

Social and cultural factors play an important role in out-migration decisions. Limited services and facilities in rural areas are considered to contribute to the impetus for youth out-migration (Argent & Walmsley, 2008; Bell et al., 2009). Research also shows that particular social and cultural characteristics of rural places can be both exacerbated by, and contribute to, youth out-migration. Rural areas are characterised as highly gendered and heteronormative spaces from which many, including sexual minorities, seek to escape (Little, 2003; Annes & Redlin, 2012). Ní Laoire (1999) has demonstrated how gendered social and cultural norms in rural places can

contribute to high female out-migration, while Jones's research (1999) highlights some experiences of oppressive or exclusionary dimensions of growing up in rural areas that contribute to young people's aspirations for out-migration.

Some research associates this with powerful discursive constructions of rural (versus urban) life which construct rural life as typically backward or marginal in comparison to the urban (Nugin, 2014). It could be argued that there is in fact a normative association between stages of the life course and urban/rural residence. Rural places tend to be discursively associated with the family formation, mid-life and later-life stages of the life course, while urban areas are associated with the young-adult stage (Ní Laoire, 2008). Giddings and Yarwood (2005) have pointed to an association between the 'growing up' and the 'growing out' of the countryside among children in rural England, linking transitions from youth to adulthood with rural-urban migration. Thus, some suggest that migration decision making is an inevitable part of transitions to adulthood and independence for rural youth (Argent & Walmsley, 2008; Thissen, Droogleever Fortuijn, Strijker & Haartsen, 2010). This notion of inevitability contributes to the construction of rural youth out-migration as a normative rite of passage in certain cultures and regions. However, as Ní Laoire (2000) argues, it is important to acknowledge the structures of power and inequality that underlie rural youth out-migration processes and to challenge its normalisation in popular discourses. Rural out-migration is bound up with geographical processes of dis/investment and economic marginalisation, which intersect with structures of gender, age, family and social class in geographically contingent ways. It is necessary therefore to understand the complexity underlying oversimplified associations between rural out-migration and the young-adult stage of the life course.

While rural youth out-migration is associated with a particular life course transition phase, it is also intersected by gender, social class and educational attainment. Gender is a significant factor in rural out-migration processes, with females generally being more likely to out-migrate from rural areas than males (Ní Laoire, 1999; Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Corbett, 2007a; Argent & Walmsley, 2008). This is associated with a relative lack of employment opportunities for women compared to men in rural areas dominated by traditionally male employment sectors such as agriculture and other primary industries. It has also been associated with the patriarchal nature of rural societies and with the gendered nature of rural familial and kin structures which often tend to encourage the social (and hence spatial) mobility of young women (Ní Laoire, 1999). However, the role of gender in rural out-migration is also quite complex, with some research suggesting that women are much more likely than men to move short distances to nearby towns and villages, and that men and women are at least equally likely to move long distances (Stockdale, 2002a; Corbett, 2007a). This suggests that gender is implicated in rural out-migration differently at local and regional scales.

A deeper understanding of the ways in which gender shapes rural out-migration is provided by a life course perspective that focuses on transitions through family structures. Stockdale (2002b) investigates the role of social and family networks and ties in migrant decision-making processes in rural Scotland, concluding that family ties are particularly important to migrants in their initial moves away from home, and again at later stages in the life course when they have children and as their own parents age. Given the close connections between gender and family in rural social structures, there is a need for more research which explicitly explores how gender, family and the life course intersect in rural migration decision making.

Many studies show that rural out-migration is closely linked to education levels, with the more highly educated being more likely to out-migrate. For example, Domina (2006) shows that non-metropolitan out-migration in the United States is strongly associated with educational attainment, with bachelor's degree graduates being more likely to migrate than those with

high-school qualifications only. Other studies have found that educational opportunities feature very prominently as stated motivations for migration among rural out-migrants (Stockdale, 2002a) or as stated motivations among rural youth intending to migrate (Drozdowski, 2008). Parental education may also be associated with increased migration intentions (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006).

The latter suggests that there may be a social class dimension to rural out-migration processes, given the close associations between education levels and social class (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Whelan & Hannan, 1999; Ball, 2003). Few studies of rural out-migration explicitly engage with questions of social class. However, Corbett (2007b) provides a convincing analysis of the way in which social class both shapes, and is shaped by, the educational, labour market and discursive structures which propel middle-class rural youth along a trajectory of education and out-migration, while simultaneously restricting the opportunities of working-class youth to the low-skill sectors of rural labour markets. In a different context, Jones's (1999) research based in Scotland links social class to family migration history, showing that rural youth out-migration is more common among those who have grown up in in-migrant families, which tend to be more middle class, than in native families, which tend to be more working class. These social class dynamics are clearly geographically contingent on local class structures. Others have highlighted the ways in which out-migration may be associated with social class mobility; for example, Gabriel (2006) explores the experiences of social advancement among young rural migrants from economically depressed rural regions in Tasmania, suggesting that rural out-migration is associated with social class mobility.

In seeking to understand contemporary rural out-migration dynamics, it is increasingly recognised that migrants' own experiences, understandings and narratives of rural out-migration need to be understood. Thus, many studies are concerned with identifying young people's own motivations, or with the perceptions/attitudes of young people and rural residents towards their rural areas. This literature has identified a range of factors that influence young people's attitudes towards their rural places of origin/residence – from economic to cultural and environmental. In particular, attention is drawn to the strong attachments formed by people to rural areas – emphasising attachments to community, lifestyle and environment, for example – and thus to the desire to stay (Wiborg, 2004; Thissen, Droogleever Fortuijn, Strijker & Haartsen, 2010; Trelle, van Hoven & Huigen, 2012; Ulrich-Schad, Henly & Safford, 2013; McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014). This points to the competing forces at play in out-migration decision-making processes, shifting attention away from emphasis on motivations for out-migration and towards complex decision making about staying or migrating (Ní Laoire, 2000; Stockdale, 2002a; Drozdowski, 2008). In other words, young migrants and non-migrants are recognised as social agents actively making (often difficult) decisions in different rural contexts, and actively involved in reproducing or resisting migration processes. Thus it is argued that young people growing up in rural areas negotiate competing pressures and influences in their decision-making processes in relation to staying or leaving. A biographical approach to these complex decision-making processes reveals how rural and urban places, and rural-urban dynamics, are interpreted, experienced and produced by actors/agents making sense of different geographical contexts (Ní Laoire, 2000; Stockdale, 2002a).

While there is a clear association between life course transitions typically associated with young adulthood, and rural out-migration, research also highlights the diversity among rural out-migrants (Stockdale, 2002a; Drozdowski, 2008). Stockdale's (2002a) research on out-migration from rural Scotland has found that age at migration can vary from the late teens to the early thirties. In particular, her research highlights the role of social and family networks in migration decision making. Having family or friendship connections in the destination area can

be a motivating factor for out-migration; similarly Drozdowski (2008) and Jones (1999) have both found that the previous migration of older siblings, or a family history of migration, are associated with greater propensity for out-migration. This body of research highlights the complexity of rural out-migration as well as the fluidity of the life course, and argues for a life course approach which acknowledges the fluid, unorthodox and diverse ways in which life course stages intersect with decisions to migrate.

Return migration

Return migration is increasingly acknowledged as a key component of counter-urbanisation and rural in-migration processes in the global north, although it has until recently been relatively under-recognised. The acknowledgement of the circularity and complexity of rural migration patterns, often involving return and remigration flows, challenges dominant narratives of in- and out-migration. Rural return is usually associated with particular life course stages or events, namely family formation, caring for ageing parents, relationship breakdown or a more general 'settling down' (Stockdale, 2002b; Ní Laoire, 2008; Rérat, 2014; von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2014b). Much research with rural returnees has highlighted the close association between family formation and rural return, as many migrants choose to return to the rural in order to raise their children, often citing the perceived benefits of the rural environment for children (Ní Laoire, 2008). This phenomenon is closely associated with wider family ties, as family connections to parents, siblings and others reinforce the attraction of the rural environment for return migrants. Returning to spend time with, or to care for, ageing parents, either temporarily or permanently, is also a significant dimension to rural return processes, reflecting the strength of family networks in migration decision making at particular stages of the life course (Stockdale, 2002b). Some research also suggests that a relationship breakdown can trigger a return move by rural out-migrants (Ní Laoire, 2008; Wall & von Reichert, 2013). Therefore, while economic and educational considerations are particularly important in out-migration decisions, family and lifestyle considerations seem to gain more weight in return decisions. However, some research also points out that economic reasons (combined with family factors) can be a motivating factor in rural return migration decisions, such as in Greece during the economic crisis in reaction to unemployment and urban decline (Gkartzios, 2013). Indeed, considering rural return as an element of counter-urbanisation contributes to efforts to challenge the dominant narratives of counter-urbanisation as a middle-class idyll-driven phenomenon (Ní Laoire, 2007; Gkartzios, 2013).

The impact of return migration on rural areas has been a focus of interest for some time in studies of international and regional migration, with studies in the 1970s and 1980s examining the link between return migration and 'modernisation' in rural areas, and concerns being raised about conflict between non-movers and returnees in rural communities (see, for example, Lewis & Williams, 1985; King, 1986). While some have argued that return migration does not in fact bring a demographic or economic dividend to rural areas, recent research by von Reichert, Cromartie and Arthun (2014a) in the USA suggests that return migrants contribute to demographic, social and economic vitality in rural communities. Attracting young migrants back to rural areas is often viewed as a potential solution to the negative effects of out-migration. Recent research has also explored identity processes and experiences of rural returnees from their own perspectives, frequently finding that return to the rural can involve a difficult process of adjustment and feelings of outsidership in the place thought of as 'home' (Easthope & Gabriel, 2006), thus questioning assumptions about inherent benefits of rural return migration.

Conclusion

Contemporary rural settings are characterised by diverse migration flows, processes, groups and motivations. Adopting a life course perspective – or relating migration to and from rural settings to principal life events and transitions – permits greater understandings of the complex and multiple considerations and influences evident across the life course and how they intersect with different rural migration flows. In particular, a life course approach helps us to challenge normative associations between age/life stage and rural migration, and in this chapter has allowed us to highlight the fluid, unorthodox and diverse ways in which life course stages intersect with decisions to migrate.

In-migration is no longer viewed as the preserve of middle-class, middle-aged or older ‘urban escapees’. Instead, rural areas have something to offer more diverse economic and social groups at different stages of the life course. There is also in-migration from other rural as well as urban locations (including overseas) to more varied rural area types (accessible, scenically attractive, less popular and remote locations). Similarly, there is greater acknowledgement of diversity among out-migrants in terms of their characteristics, influences and decisions.

A number of different migration processes are evident. While in-migration is commonly conceptualised in terms of counter-urbanisation, might the movement of people at different life course stages (family formation, retirement) and involving different migration flows (for example, retirement, return, inter-rural, international) represent particular components of counter-urbanisation or separate and distinctive migratory processes? A life course perspective offers an opportunity to unravel processes which are frequently fused together into one ‘catch all’ counter-urbanisation category.

These diverse migration flows to and from rural areas give rise to highly variable demographic, economic, social and cultural consequences depending upon the life course stage at which the move has occurred (alongside the relative importance of economic, social and lifestyle factors at work). It has long been acknowledged that tensions exist between in-migrants and long-term local rural residents (Cloke & Goodwin, 1992; Woods, 2005; Brown & Glasgow, 2008). Issues of ‘geriatrification’ (Philip, 1999), housing affordability (Taylor, 2008), gentrification (Phillips, 2005; Stockdale, 2010), local service provision (Divoudi & Wishardt, 2004) and community cohesion (Murdoch, Lowe, Ward & Marsden, 2003) have been reported. Against these, however, there are positive aspects to in-migration. Migrants bring rural economic development potential; they create businesses (Bosworth, 2010) and stimulate demand for housing, goods and services. In addition, they are active volunteers in community activities. Indeed, such are the perceived benefits (associated with middle-aged and retiree life course stage migrants in particular) that some have called for specific policies designed to attract such migrants (Reeder, 1998; Atterton, 2006; Brown & Glasgow, 2008; Jauhiainen, 2009; Murakami, Gilroy & Atterton, 2009). Youth out-migration too is commonly viewed in problematic terms for the places left behind: ageing populations, social conservatism, gender imbalance, population decline, contraction in rural services/facilities and declining social capital (Stockdale, 2004; Argent & Walmsley, 2008). There have been calls for employment creation and cultural initiatives (Gibson, 2008) and policies to make these communities more attractive in an attempt to encourage young people to stay, or to attract return migrants to rural areas (for example, Stockdale, 2004; Jauhiainen, 2009; McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014). This emphasis, however, tends to overlook the positive impact of out-migration on these young people’s own lives (Argent & Walmsley, 2008), although for some migration can be problematic (Stockdale, 2004). Returning too may give rise to difficulties, although encouragement of return migration is often considered a potential solution to the problems of youth out-migration in declining rural areas.

This chapter acknowledges that there are multiple life course triggers for migration. The factors contributing to rural in- or out-migration involve complex intersections between life course events and wider social, economic and structural processes shaping, and shaped by, rural and urban areas. Migration processes are key to understanding the complex interconnections between the rural and the urban in the contemporary global north, as powerful constructions of rurality (and its other, the urban) are produced, reproduced and resisted, through diverse migration flows to and from rural places. Spatial inequalities are reinforced and also reshaped in part through the movements of people at different life course stages to and from rural places, as migration processes contribute to processes such as marginalisation, gentrification, geriatricisation, as well as development of rural places. A life course perspective facilitates an understanding of these processes which recognises the interconnection of urban–rural dynamics with family, gender, age, caring and other socio–biographical imperatives, providing a complex and rich perspective on migration and rurality.

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