

Research Article (Outside Theme)

Imagining Finland: negotiating the sense of self through return imaginaries

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Abstract

When embarking on a migration journey, migrants cultivate personal ideas of themselves 'here' and 'there'. This includes one's reflections about a possible return – the return imaginaries. They emerge from the time-, place- and person-specific ideas, attitudes, feelings and possibilities before, and after, relocation. Through a digital ethnographic study, this paper seeks to expand the research done on how the so-called 'middling' migrants negotiate the sense of self through return imaginaries. I discuss one such group, Finns, in the UK and ask 'what is the role of return imaginaries in negotiating the sense of self in Finns' translocal place-making in the UK?'. The results show that Finns' return imaginaries function as a framework for positioning and reaffirming the self in relation to the UK and Finland during one's migration trajectory. In relation to their idea of return, Finns negotiate the questions 'who am I?' and 'who do I want to be?'. Through reflecting on the everydayness in the UK and Finland, and their ideas about return visits, Finns produce a 'translocal sense of self'.

Keywords: return imaginary, UK, Finland, translocal, place-making

Introduction

I am proud of my Finnishness; it is valued here [in the UK]. I still want to visit Finland every year, the Finnish winter and summer are important to me. I sometimes daydream about returning to Finland, but I think I have changed so much that I would not fit in there anymore, my life is here.

In the above quote Milla, who had moved to the UK from Finland twenty years ago, reflects on Finland's role in her life. Milla does not foresee returning to Finland but explains that her plans are not set in stone. Milla's excerpt shows how a migration trajectory is wrapped around an idea of 'projected, imagined, alternative futures' – the imaginaries of the self 'here' and 'there' (Brickell & Datta 2011; Salazar 2011). It also

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shows that imagining one's return is an important part of migration imaginaries and 'describes the multiply-located senses of self' (Conradson & McKay 2007). The ideas about return change over time and may not have anything to do with the actual return, but are important in positioning the self in relation to several places (Carling *et al.* 2015). This does not mean, however, that a translocal self would identify *either* with one's place of residence *or* that from where they have moved away. Instead, imagining one's potential return forms an overarching, ongoing reflection of the self in relation to multiple meaningful places.

Focusing on imagined return as a thought process, continuously participated in during one's migration trajectory (Bolognani 2016), this study discusses the idea of returning as a 'return imaginary'. Through a digital ethnographic study including 41 Finns, a middling migrant¹ group in the UK, this paper asks *'what is the role of return imaginaries in negotiating the sense of self in Finns' translocal place-making in the UK?'* Migrants' ideas of return in the context of the actual return taking place have been discussed extensively, but addressing return as a thought process in negotiating the sense of self has not been discussed as widely. Hence, this article seeks to expand the research done on the function of return imaginaries in migrants' sense of self negotiation as a form of translocal place-making.

My study is situated within the framing concept of 'translocal', which in the context of my research means imagined and physical activities stretched between several 'locals' (translocal: 'transcends beyond regional or national boundaries; not confined to a particular place' (Lexico 2022)). While 'translocal' can be understood as including different locals within national boundaries, my research focuses on the everyday life that is lived as (dis)connected to locals in different countries (the UK and Finland). In translocal context, my conceptual framework is built on the 'self', '(spatial) imaginaries' and 'translocal place-making. I discuss three groups with differing ideas about returning to Finland: those who did not see returning likely (the 'objectors'), those who kept their options open (the 'dwellers'), and those who fostered the idea of one day returning to Finland (the 'home-goers').

I discuss 'self' as an overarching awareness containing different identities. Self is a 'reservoir of beliefs, understandings, and sentiments of oneself' that are the result of internalised practises and memory (Vainikka 2020). Hence, I do not, exclusively, discuss 'identities', as they interlap during different situations and phases in one's migration journey, and are of different importance depending on one's assumed positionality 'here' and 'there'. The self is a 'subject with an agency' but needs to establish a balance between its multiple, unequally related sides to enable coherence (Vainikka 2020). I focus on the personal and social sides of the self that both contribute to its construction (Antonsich 2020), and are negotiated and reflected through return imaginaries. Return imaginaries are reflections of the balancing act of the two sides of the self in my respondents' migration trajectories. The return imaginaries are not fixed, but similarly to the self, fluid and mutable over time.

I consider return imaginaries as a form of spatial imaginaries. Spatial imaginaries are, according to Edward Said (1979), collective social narratives and ways of talking about places and spaces. In human geography, the ontology of spatial imaginaries has been approached from several different viewpoints. They have been discussed as semiotic orders, worldviews and representational discourses, and increasingly as being performative discourses where social relations are reproduced and changed, embodied by people in combining both linguistic and material characteristics (Watkins 2015). Often,

spatial imaginaries are engaged in on different levels. ‘Place imaginaries’ represent a fixed spatial area, such as ‘Finland’ (Davis 2011). Chang (2010) discusses ‘idealised space imaginaries’ that signify certain qualities such as Finland as an ‘innovative country’, and ‘spatial transformations’ refer to occurrences taking place over spatialities, such as ‘gentrification’ (Watkins 2015). These definitions of spatial imaginaries focus mostly on the social referents, therefore partly omitting the personal – which is specifically important in studying translocality, and a crucial part in investigating the construction of the sense of self (Antonsich 2010). Return imaginaries are influenced by both social and personal referents: social referents being the attachments to symbolic familiarity, collective cultural awareness of ‘home’ as ‘homeland’; and personal referents meaning personal experiences, memories, and ‘home’ as a domestic space (Antonsich 2010). I bring in both sides in discussing the self and the return imaginaries as an intertwined, malleable construction.

Due to the stretched nature of translocal communities, translocal migrants need to ‘develop possibilities of connected lives’ (Shubin 2015) and find ways to manage their simultaneous situatedness and connectedness to several places (Brickell & Datta 2011). In the core of making sense of self and the multiple places within one’s migration trajectory - making places translocally - lies the constant need to balance between re-enacting one’s culture of origin and creating place-specific, meaningful behaviours in the place of residency. Translocal place-making is about managing several co-presences between localities, gaining and creating, iteratively, several sets of place-specific understanding(s) and cultural and social capitals and negotiating place-specific everyday positionalities, such as status, rights, citizenship, identity, home and belonging (Brickell & Datta 2011; Longhurst *et al.* 2009; Thompson 2017). Imaginaries provide a way to generate, and regulate, connectedness to several meaningful places.

As imagination and the ability to produce imaginaries are, for example for Lennon (2015), the prerequisite for experiencing anything, it can be argued that imaginaries are a necessary part of place-making as places are considered lived experiences (Bolognani 2014; Mueller 2015; Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020). The connections to one’s country – and perhaps more importantly, to one’s localities and communities – of origin, and one’s engagement with the equivalents in the destination country, make ‘emplaced communities extended’ (Appadurai 1996). Through the lens of imaginaries, translocal approach introduces a nuanced view of these extended communities and the embodied, agency-oriented subjective contexts of migrant place-making (Brickell & Datta 2011). Research on translocal migration would benefit from a more adventurous discussion on the linkage between the sense of self, imaginaries, and place-making. Scholars across disciplines have argued that producing imaginaries plays a significant part in migrants’ trajectories (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020; Koikkalainen & Kyle 2016; Bolognani 2016; Mueller 2015; Bolognani 2014; Smith 2011).

I argue that as one needs to start building the relationship between the migrant self and the places in one’s migration trajectory, the subjective return imaginaries function as an important form of translocal place-making by producing a framework for positioning and reaffirming the self. My study participants had moved to the UK from Finland and discussed ‘return’ as a permanent, or a long-term, relocation to Finland. I discuss the participants’ return imaginaries as fluid ‘first-person subjectivities’ (Parameshwar Gaonkar 2002) that mirror one’s temporospatial understanding of the self – an emplaced form of translocal place-making that does not take a form of a fixed plan but rather functions as a framework in which it is possible to reflect and position the self.’

‘Middling migrants’ reasons for migration can be seen as ‘expressing the desire to construct a personal life course’ (Salazar 2014). Navigating the different positionalities within one’s translocal places and making sense of them requires constant meaning-making processes stretching from one site of identification to multiple sites of identification (Oakes & Schein 2006). Migration is a disruptive process for the self (Bolognani 2016), visible in my findings for example as my participants reflect on the culturally perceived moral obligations, they need to negotiate between one’s preferred practises and their families’ expectations, being potentially forced to face personal referents that one does not identify with. Imaginaries help position the self, shaping identities and constructing peoples, times and places – the ‘directions in which we wish, can and will go’ (Cantó-Milà & Seebach 2015: 198). They also produce types of otherness to identify oneself with or against (Salazar 2011). Appadurai’s (1996) observation that imagination is a tool for people to make sense of their daily lives builds a strong basis for arguing that the power of imaginaries is substantial, as ‘people worldwide rely on such imaginaries, from the most spectacular fantasies to the most mundane reveries, to shape identities of themselves and others’ (Salazar 2011). Bolognani (2016) has even argued that the ‘transitional space’ that imaginaries produce is a necessary element in the construction of the sense of self about one’s migrant trajectory.

I will first join the interdisciplinary discussion about migrants’ imagined return and the sense of self, and then discuss the methodology and findings that substantiate the argument of return imaginaries being a conceptual tool that enables a deeper understanding of the making sense of the translocal self.

Return imaginaries and the sense of self in translocal place-making

Translocal migrants constantly balance their relationships to the ‘heres’ and ‘theres’ in their trajectories. Central to this balancing act is the identifying of the self – reflecting on questions about ‘*nho am I?*’ and ‘*Who do I want to be?*’ in relation to multiple translocal sites (Walsh 2011; Saar 2018). By engaging in imaginaries about returning to one’s sending country, migrants can evaluate their relationships with multiple places, and establish their preferred idea of (dis)connecting to these places. Imagination is part of one’s identity-building (Sime *et al.* 2020) and enables identity choices by enabling one to produce the hierarchies between localities in a way that correlates with their preferred sense of self (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020).

Arguably, when thinking about migrants’ ideas of return, the physical return itself is not so important. Instead, the developing projections about the self and one’s lived experiences in specific places become a symbolic, emplaced form of trans-local placemaking (Brickell & Datta 2011). In this paper, I focus on the function of the imagined return as a framework in which one can position and reaffirm the self in relation to several places. I will first explore the idea of ‘return’ and ‘return imaginary’ in scholarly discussion, and then focus on how the negotiation of the sense of self can be seen as a process interlinked to the idea of return.

In the rich body of interdisciplinary research about migrants’ ideas about returning to one’s ‘homeland’, return as a cognitive process has been discussed for example as ‘return considerations’ and how different temporalities of migration impact ideas of return (Erdal & Ezzati 2015). Carling and Pettersen (2014) have discussed ‘return

intentions' that are shaped by migrants' levels of engagement with their sending and receiving countries. 'Projected future lives' after return have been discussed by Hatfield (2011), in her work about British returnees. Return visits as the source of forming an idea of returning has been sided by for example Bolognani (2014), Müller (2015) and Wojtyńska and Skaptadóttir (2020). Finns' return migration has been studied for example related to returnees' reasons for returning and adjusting back to Finland (Saarela & Finnäs 2009; Koikkalainen *et al.* 2016).

Return as something 'at the back of one's mind', where the idea is to return but is – sometimes indefinitely – postponed, has been discussed as the 'return myth' (Brickell & Datta 2011), often in the context of diasporic communities. Recently, migrants' ideas of return have been sided in discussions related to political occurrences in one's host country (Bolognani & Erdal 2017; Sime *et al.* 2020; Fauser 2020; Riikonen 2020). Finns' ideas about returning have been researched for example by Heikkilä (2011), discussing factors influencing Finnish emigrants' willingness to return to Finland, and Saarela and Scott (2020), discussing return migration and naturalisation as 'two elements in the decision process of immigrants' in the context of Finns in Sweden.

Bolognani (2016), in discussing British Pakistanis, has discussed the thought process related to return as 'return fantasy' and Bolognani and Erdal (2017) in discussing Pakistani migrants in the UK and Norway have used the exact term 'return imaginary', referring to it as a 'discursive possibility of return'. In these discussions, the imaginary itself is important in shaping migrants' identities. Bolognani (2016) argues that by imagining one's return as a form of weighting potential futures, one can make sense of the present and this can help one to 'normalise one's migration experience'. Appadurai (1996) has called imaginaries 'social practises that can connect different places'. The sense of self is, then, essentially 'emerging out of range of connections' (Conradson & McKay 2007).

It is this (dis)connectivity between places that is at the core of translocal placemaking and making sense of self in relation to the multiple places. Antonsich (2010) points out that the self is the 'way people relate to place', and that the self is constructed through the meanings the place conveys. In a translocal context, the meanings one processes are stemming from a set of sites. As Brickell & Datta (2011) point out, migrants' local, grounded lives are influenced by various interconnecting translocal imaginaries. Hence, the migrant self is 'scripted through imaginaries of belonging' (King & Christou 2011) 'here' and 'there'.

'Sense of self' and 'return' are subjective constructions that stem from the migrant condition – the social position and lifestyle that Bourdieu (1984) discusses as being assumed through material and physical circumstances and lifestyle. These influence one's attitudes and worldviews and enable one to shape a sense of self (Lister 2009; Lundström & Teitelbaum 2017). Migrants have been accustomed to participating in socially shared imaginaries – the 'socioculturally constructed [...] unspoken representational assemblages' (Salazar 2011) and have created culture- and place-specific subjectivities around the idea of migration – including the idea of return. While returning may be the planned-for outcome at the end of one's migration cycle for some (Lulle & Krisjane 2019) it may be a distant, unrealistic dream for others who, for example, due to not being able to travel, rely on ideas of imagined communities – the mindset of the communities where one migrated from (Anderson 2006; Chatterjee & Desai 2020). Returning can also be perceived as an undesirable outcome of one's migration trajectory (Saar 2018; Fauser 2020). The imbalance between the (in)abilities to access embodied return and having to rely on imagined return naturally affects the

meanings attached to ‘return’ in one’s migration trajectory and influences the way one perceives the self.

Imaginarities form a connective web between migrants, places, meanings and the perceptions of the self. But rather than producing a fixed source of meanings one could tap onto, imaginaries facilitate the process of negotiating the sense of self in relation to different places in different phases in their life course and are mutable. The way migrants reflect on the self against their return to specific locations stems from one’s experiences in places in different contexts that have generated specific space-reading skills for them (Vainikka 2020). The main questions, ‘*who am I?*’ and ‘*who do I want to be?*’ in relation to multiple places are revisited and reflected on by the translocal self. McAdams (1997) refers to the process of negotiating the sense of self as ‘selfing’, meaning that one ‘locates the subjective experiences of oneself’. This generates feelings of agency and enables the recognition of the sense of otherness – a condition for the self (Vainikka 2020). I draw from this view of the self being a mutable awareness that is constantly negotiated, rather than a fixed construction.

Hatfield (2011) points out that migrants may consider ‘return’ differently depending on *where* they think of returning to. They can be thinking of returning to the nation they left, but also to the locally experienced, cultural and personal social dynamics, emotions, sensations and expectations they relate to places. Hence, the ways the self is negotiated in relation to places can be seen as forming on different levels: societal, social and personal. Materiality, history, landscapes and language form societal and social referents to places and personal relations, memories, past experiences, sensory environments and everyday mundanities create personal referents (Antonsich 2010; Conradson & McKay 2007).

Social referents, such as landscapes and language, generate a collective sense of belonging that forms especially in relation to experiences of places in meaningful times in people’s lives (Vainikka 2016). Social environments in specific places become part of ‘social memory’ and are entangled with personal moments in these places (Antonsich 2010). Both social and personal referents are important when narrating the place as ‘home’ – home can mean the actual domestic setting where everyday is lived or the symbolic spatiality that one links with the feeling of familiarity (Antonsich 2010). When approaching it from the opposite perspective, the perception of ‘societal alienation’ is the lack of identification with the societal atmosphere in one’s sending country, and ‘material alienation’ is the motivation behind moving to gain a better economic situation (Robins 2019). Robins (2019) points out that when one moves because of societal alienation, the motivation is often expressed through ‘quality of life’ that is not necessarily defined through materiality but is often cultural and psychological. The value of this ‘quality of life’ comes through especially in the reflections on return, where it is often described through societal qualities (such as atmosphere, bureaucracy and image) in both sending and destination countries.

In addition, return imaginaries acknowledge both social and personal relevance of places for the self. It can be argued that a return imaginary consists of two frames: the outer layer, including societal and social referents, and an inner layer, including personal referents. The layers function together, but are of different importance, depending on the way the self identifies with them and evaluates their importance. The return imaginary can, hence, be that of a static, romanticized, idealized, frozen timespace that represents specific qualities in one’s past, or that of a dynamic, forward-moving social space that one wants to (re)join. ‘Return’ can also be an idea of a spatial representation of qualities that are not correlating with one’s sense of self and something that one

does not wish to be a part of. As a result, the idea of return differs between individuals and migrant groups on the levels of *possibilities* and *preferences* that are available.

Who am I?

Return imaginaries consider different types of place attachments, often appearing to first highlight the self as an embodied ‘display’ of a particular place (Antonsich 2010). This is seen through the reflections of ‘there’ that appear to narrate an emphasised national identity for example through reflecting on societal discourses (such as ‘a safe country’). These discourses position the self within the familiar frames of continuity and stability (Diener & Hagen 2022) in one’s ‘place of origin’. In this way, people narrate their positionality as members of a particular group.

Return imaginaries are often narrated around social referents such as the climate, cultural ways of interacting, and collectively shared know-how related to specific places and in this way, produce static, ‘idealised space imaginaries’ (Watkins 2015; Chang 2010). They reflect a general spatial quality of the country, or region, of origin as a whole. These imaginaries convey attachment to place as a permanent construct of identification that represents the emotionally charged allegory of ‘roots’ (Diener & Hagen 2022).

While these imaginaries include also personal referents, such as memories of specific times and people in one’s life, they appear subsidiary to social referents. In these imaginaries, the self is reflecting its positionality through having become accustomed to social referents that offer a sense of continuity and that can be used to form a feeling of connectedness to ‘past locals’ (Laviolette 2012; Vainikka 2016; Laviolette 2003). This type of return imaginary reflects the negotiation of the question ‘*who am I?*’ that acknowledges being a member of a spatially and statically defined ‘us’ (Laviolette 2003) ‘there’, but is perhaps more invested in the personal referents and local meanings ‘here’ when positioning the self.

Translocal migrants also produce return imaginaries related to their country of origin that include more subjective, emotion-laden, narrowed-down snapshots of idealised spaces that are stemming from socio-cultural discourses in a particular place and are connected to specific personal experiences and meaningful social relations. These types of return imaginaries appear as dynamic and forward-going entanglements of social and personal referents, and the self invests in negotiating its positionality through projecting its situatedness in the everyday mundanities ‘there’. The self often appears to identify more with specific locals rather than with the wider frame of nation. These imaginaries appear to negotiate the ‘*who am I?*’ in relation to perceiving place as ‘personal’ (Relph 1976) and as an affiliation: familiarity that resonates with the ‘real self’ (Antonsich 2010, paraphrasing Cuba and Hummon 1993).

Who do I want to be?

One’s evolving relationships with places force the re-negotiation of the self and the past solutions to the question ‘*who am I?*’. Return imaginaries carry with them the past cultural and social ties and the pressure of balancing between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ situatedness. In making sense of the ‘new’ migrant self in relation to multiple places, one has to negotiate the level on which the self prefers to connect to and develop, the place-specific sociocultural knowledge. Saar (2018), in discussing UK-based Estonians,

argues that comparisons between sociocultural dynamics, temporal and intra-subjective (comparing different parts of one's identity in decision-making) aspects influence the ideas of return. According to Saar (2018), the types of comparisons related to one's idea of returning enable migrants to relate to the question '*who do I want to be?*'.

Through subjective, lived experiences, places maintain, and produce, different types of knowledge for individuals. On a personal level, the 'sense of autobiographical insiderness' (Antonsich 2010) contains knowledge accumulated through life events in specific places. On societal and sociocultural levels, place-specific understanding of how people, places and societal discourses are interlinked can be understood as 'mutually possessed knowing' (Candea 2010). Both sets of knowledge are subjected to friction as new experiences and encounters influence migrants' place-specific understandings. Actively nurturing a place-specific understanding correlates with the aspiration for continued social reproduction; and in turn with the willingness to belong to a specific group (Bourdieu 1984; Ryan & Mulholland 2015). Hence, the idea of one's return offers a frame in which to evaluate one's belonging by choosing (not) to keep accumulating place-specific knowledge.

Spatial imaginaries contain 'otherings', taking the view that people and places are different and unequal (Sharp 2009). Evaluating 'otherness' within return imaginaries is important in seeking the answer to '*who do I want to be?*'. The process of othering enables the self to define itself (Vainikka 2020). An example of othering within return imaginaries can be seen as forming through the idea of return visits. Carling *et al.* (2015: 26) argue that return visits 'enable investment in social capital'. This can, in some cases, influence the decision to actually return. Carling *et al.* (2015) also claim the opposite, and I agree with them that coming face to face with the sociocultural knowledge that one has chosen to detach the self from may cause migrants not to want to invest in accumulating it. This in turn influences their ideas of staying in their destination countries. While return visits are central to the migrant experience (King & Raghuram 2013), it is important to consider how the mere *idea* of return visits plays a part in the formation of return imaginaries.

Through visits, one reproduces the local and maintains, re-establishes – or abandons – connections to close relationships, culture and roots (Müller 2015; Tan & Yeoh 2011; Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020). During visits, one revisits past social and personal referents and evaluates them against the self. These evaluations generate 'imagined spacetimes' that are returned to when reflecting on return visits. Imagined spacetimes contain nostalgic idealisations of particular spaces that are 'frozen in time', but also undesired imaginings of self 'here' and 'there'. As people tend to shape memories in a way that serves one's definition of self in particular phases in one's narrative, the confrontation with the memory and actual reality can lead to a shifting sense of self (Marschall 2017). As a result, the 'interaction between the present and the past' (Pearce 2012) results in the identification of place attachments and place detachments. They enable one to experience different ways of feeling (dis)connected (Sime *et al.* 2020).

It could be argued that 'othering' generates imaginaries of 'spatial transformation' (Watkins 2015; Massey 2005) where one hopes that certain aspects of spaces would turn into something 'better'. When looked at from the return imaginaries' point of view, it is observable that while negotiating the positionalities of the self between places, translocal migrants engage in both 'idealised spaces' and 'spatial transformation' imaginaries not only on the national and global levels but also on their personal, subjective, local-local levels. Through reflecting on the questions '*who am I?*' and '*who do I want to be?*', migrants make decisions related to their trajectories (Carling *et al.* 2015).

The decisions reflect one’s responses to ‘the power of images and narratives through the operation of memory and desire’ (Conradson & McKay 2007).

The sifting place attachments and detachments produce ‘axes of perspective’ (Diener & Hagen 2022) that allow migrants, through distance, to reflect on their relationships with places from different angles. In return imaginaries, this is seen in the inner layer of the imaginary where people begin to narrate more social referents and generate othering against referents they no longer consider as corresponding to their sense of self. This creates ‘situated and situational place attachments’ that allow them to identify, simultaneously, with a heightened sense of national identity and with a personalised, temporal, and situational self that applies individual agency to one’s trajectory. This lets them, if necessary, dismiss the national identity in favour of individual identity, and vice versa in situations where the self needs to narrate itself ‘to a particular audience’ (Diener & Hagen 2022).

Context, data and methods

Approximately 16 000–23 000 Finns live in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2021), most in the Greater London area (Embassy of Finland, London 2022). Finns’ translocality in the UK from a place-making point of view is not extensive in scholarly discussion, despite the UK’s popularity as a destination country (Table 1). Gawlewicz & Sotkasiira (2020) have called Finns an under-researched, ‘hidden population’ in the UK. Finns’ settlement experiences are, hence, important to bring into the discussion about European middling migrants’ trajectories.

The sociocultural atmosphere where one grows up influences the way one perceives what a person can do and forms a background for one’s available choices and actions (Ahmed 2007). The idea of a ‘Nordic Utopia’ or the ‘Nordic Welfare State’ has shaped Finns’ perception of the self. The conceptualising of equality, independence, social welfare and the ability to question social circumstances (Lister 2009) have embedded the idea of the Nordic societies being “the best of all possible thinkable worlds” (Kangas & Palme 2005) into the socio-cultural imaginaries about the self for many Finland-born Finns. This has generated an idea of individual control – a feature that is characteristic for Finns’ migration trajectories in the UK, as also seen in the context of Brexit (Riikonen 2020).

Table 1. Top three destination countries (people of Finnish heritage moving from Finland) (Statistics Finland 2022).

2000	2005	2010	2015	2016
Sweden 3524	Sweden 2929	Sweden 2341	Sweden 2582	Sweden 2826
Norway 1215	UK 1069	UK 790	UK 931	UK 1044
UK 731	Spain 570	Spain 493	Germany 646	Germany 723
2017	2018	2019	2020	
Sweden 2560	Sweden 2342	Sweden 1999	Sweden 1579	
UK 1005	UK 1029	UK 891	UK 715	
Germany 653	Germany 677	Spain 606	Germany 511	

As part of the Nordic background discourse, Finns in the UK produce so-called ‘quality discourses’, being narrated as types of ‘idealised space’ imaginaries. This means perceiving ‘the Finnish way of doing things’ (for example the material culture, access to health care, education) equalling to ‘the best’; and something one can base one’s expectations on when making sense of similar things elsewhere. The quality discourses function in two ways: respondents often mentioned that on one hand, the ‘Finnish education system is the best in the world’, and on the other hand ‘Finland is a narrow-minded country’. Quality discourses became an important factor in Finns’ return imaginaries.

Especially during the pre-Brexit era of free movement – a point in time when the majority of the participants had relocated to the UK - settling down in the UK has meant a major personal commitment to the country, stemming from the self-actualisation needs that many interviewees state as their reason for moving abroad (Riikonen 2020). The ability to seek fulfilment for the sense of adventure and study and work opportunities have been aided by the ability to ‘reverse one’s decisions to migrate and return’ (Carling *et al.* 2015). This has been the setting shaping Finns’ migration to the UK, especially in pre-Brexit times. Brexit was, however, not excessively mentioned when contemplating returning, but was acknowledged. This indicated that after the initial shock, respondents had been, gradually, regaining control of their preferred migration trajectory where they were again able to embark on a life of a translocal migrant by ‘building one’s identity through mobility and lifestyle choices’ (Salazar 2014).

As part of a wider research project exploring Finns’ translocal place-making in the UK, this paper discusses digital ethnographic data from 41 semi-structured interviews with Finns in the UK. The respondents were recruited through a Facebook discussion group, aimed at Finns living in the UK. The group is one of the most active groups for Finns in the UK (over 3500 members in 2022). As I had lived in the UK, I was a member of the Facebook group where the interviewees were recruited but did not know any of the study participants personally. In using social media in ethnographic research, it is important to gain an understanding of the platform from both technical and cultural viewpoints, as knowledge of the setting is mandatory (Giglietto *et al.* 2012). Hence, it was justified for me to be part of the social media community I was studying. My researcher’s positionality was active and transparent: before the interviews, I introduced the study, my background and the way the data would be used, and obtained informed consent from all participants.

The interview themes focused on the participants’ translocal everyday, the ways they kept in touch with Finland, and return visit practises. The main theme was not the idea of ‘return’. However, two questions brought out the significance of respondents’ ideas of return: ‘How do you see Finland’s role in your life now?’ and ‘Have you planned to return to Finland permanently?’. In addition, respondents often brought up the ‘projected futures’ if they were to return while reflecting on their translocal everyday in general. Three different groups emerged from the data: ‘objectors’, who refused the idea of return; dwellers, who were indecisive about returning; and ‘home-goers’, who wanted to return. Based on the participants’ ideas about return, I sorted them into these groups. I then identified patterns in the data, related to participants’ takes on their translocal everydayness and return visits, and a thematic analysis was performed with Atlas.ti software.

Respondents had settled in various areas in the UK (Figure 1.) and moved from several areas in Finland. Most were from the capital region (Helsinki and surrounding areas),

but several were from Eastern, Western, and Northern Finland. The majority of the participants were female (38 females, 3 males); a common occurrence in qualitative data about Finns in the UK (Koikkalainen 2013; Gawlewicz & Sotkasiira 2020). Statistically, migration to the UK from Finland is dominated by women. Between 1990 and 2020, 63% of Finnish citizens emigrating to the UK were women (Statistics Finland 2022). If statistics on Finnish nationals' emigration from Finland to the UK and vice versa during 1990–2020 are compared, relationally more men moved to Finland from the UK than women. Many female participants in my study mention having stayed in the UK due to settling down with a British partner, despite originally having made plans for a temporary stay. While it would require a more thorough discussion than what is possible in the scope of this paper, it can be suggested that this partly contributes to the gender bias in many studies about Finns in the UK. Furthermore, Koikkalainen (2013) notes that Finnish women in the UK are more willing to participate in studies. Similarly, Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira (2020) note this in their study where they tried to recruit Finnish males for their dataset.

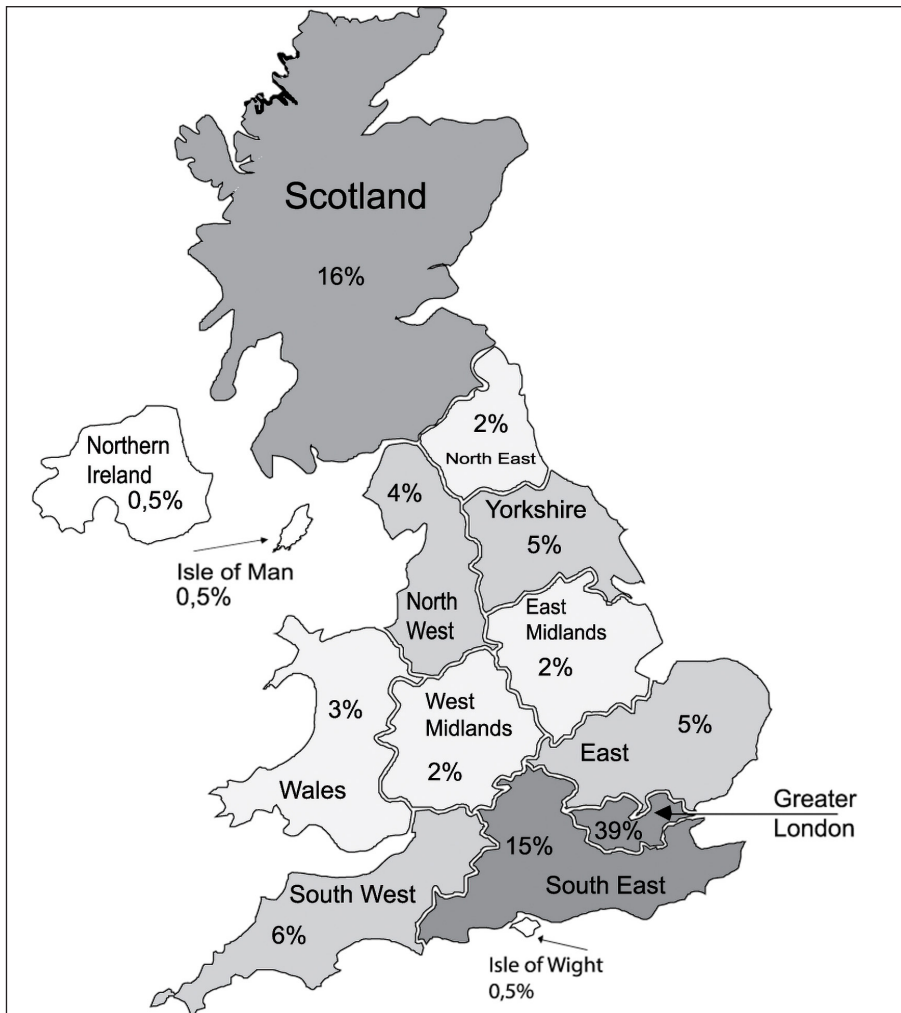


Figure 1. Study participants' areas of residence in the UK

Most respondents were in the age group of 31–40 years and held a degree in higher education. The main reasons for moving to the UK were studying, a sense of adventure and career possibilities, echoing the findings of Koikkalainen (2019), and being characteristics of ‘middling migrants’ (Conradson & Latham 2005). Their connections to other Finns in the UK varied from active participation in Finnish networks to having hardly any interest in them. One respondent mentioned that they did not stay in touch with other Finns as they were ‘no longer depending on one another’ after becoming more settled, highlighting the independent nature of Finns’ migration experiences.

Due to the geographical distance and Covid-19, the interviews were conducted via Facebook’s chat feature, instant messaging (IM) – a method seen as one of the ‘innovations in ethnography’ (Seligmann & Estes 2020). It was selected due to both its efficiency and social media’s role as a natural everyday activity among the participants, an advantage noted by Barratt (2012) and Kähkö (2020). However, while data from social media platforms are easy to harvest, it poses questions about data protection and privacy as data is often stored online, potentially resulting in personal data being leaked to third parties. Both my data sets were anonymised, taken offline, and stored on two external hard drives.

Due to the lack of face-to-face dynamics, potentially resulting in more interpretative data, it was important to establish mutual trust (Barratt 2012). Participants indicated using social media as a means to maintain their social dynamics in the UK and Finland. Hence, respondents routinely integrated participation as a part of their normal everyday. Participation filled in mundane spacetimes and thus eradicated the feeling of ‘being interviewed’. This follows Snee *et al.*’s (2016) observation that the internet is ‘embedded, embodied and everyday’. As I introduced my background and casually chatted with participants at the beginning of the interviews, it was easier for them to relate to me and talk more freely. Links to similarities in our experiences were mentioned, making the atmosphere light. Furthermore, participants were able to choose the language (English or Finnish) they preferred to use, an important factor in having a sense of power in expressing themselves (James & Busher 2011).

Hitchings and Latham (2020) point out that ethnographic approach decreases the ‘personal distance typical of other techniques’. The ethnographic lens allowed making observations through my personal experiences. My subjectivity and my analysis’ validity need to be reflected. As several years had passed between my personal experiences in the UK and collecting and analysing my data, I had gained distance to the ways I negotiated my translocalities and how I felt about returning to Finland at the time. Furthermore, as my participants described very different life situations from what I had experienced, I was able to reflect on their stories more objectively.

Staying, leaving and somewhere in between: three ways of imagining a returning Self

The three groups that emerged from my data narrated partially collective, but still substantially different, return imaginaries. They stemmed from entangled types of spatial imaginaries, reflecting the self on social and personal levels. Participants brought up associations with geographical locations as fixed spatial areas, such as ‘the north’, the numerous positive and negative qualities related to Finland, and the acknowledged societal occurrences such as ‘internationalisation’. These wider spatial imaginaries were

translated into more specific ‘quality discourses’ about Finland, such as ‘safe, clean, well-functioning but boring country’, and brought up social referents (Antonsich 2010) like the materialities, history, landscape, and language in Finland. The social self (Antonsich 2010) appeared to construct ‘an outer frame’ for the emerging return imaginaries. Reflecting one’s preferences in relation to the qualities in Finland enabled respondents to position themselves within their current life situations.

After narrating a seemingly collective idea of Finland, seeing it as a symbolic space of familiarity (Antonsich 2010), respondents started recounting personal referents like memories, social dynamics, personal preferences and past experiences (Antonsich 2010). These began to reveal differences in the way participants imagined return, and the personal self started to form an inner, more personalised frame, for the return imaginaries.

Objectors

The majority of respondents in this category had lived in the UK for over 10 years, some over 30 or more, but some had arrived just a few years ago. Objectors articulated clearly that they did not see returning as a preferred choice. They expressed their imagined return through societal alienation (Robins 2019) and described feeling distanced from Finland. They identified against qualities like ‘cold climate’ and Finland’s social atmosphere; but also narrated an attachment to Finland through social referents (Antonsich 2010) such as ‘quiet, beautiful nature’ and ‘the snow in the winter and the sea in the summer’. Some also brought up the familiar sensoriums, telling me that ‘every scent and flavour is so familiar, [Finland] feels so much like ‘mine’’. Objectors’ emotional attachments to Finland, hence, were narrated mostly through social referents and not so much through personal ones. Objectors situated their personal referents more in the UK; and in this way, constructed their social everyday ‘around local meanings’ (Vainikka 2016), detached from those in Finland. Tuula, who moved 50 years ago, explains:

I would absolutely not [move back to Finland]! This long-distance love suits me best because the way Finns communicate (I mean they don’t communicate) ... gets on my nerves. I would not get on there [Finland] anymore.

Tuula’s mention of a ‘long-distance love’ is an interesting one and is brought up in many objectors’ narratives as a strong emotional link to the ‘idea’ of Finland. It highlights Finland’s permanence as the ‘place of one’s roots’.

Dwellers

The dwellers were the largest group in the dataset. Most of them had lived in the UK for 2–10 years, but some had stayed over 20, or even 30 years. Their idea of return was constructed around the possibility to do so should one choose to. Many expressed returning being a distant possibility, even though not an impossible idea, as opposed to objectors. Dwellers reflected on the societal and social referents linked to Finland, especially the quality of everyday life. While dwellers also described attachments towards Finnish landscapes and nature as a spatial identification of ‘us’ (Vainikka 2016), their social referents were often expressed related to personal and professional possibilities,

such as work-life balance, Finland's reputation in the world, and the labour market. Dwellers stayed up to date with any requirements for maintaining free movement (in past-Brexit times) and reflected on the possibilities of 'fitting in' in Finland should they decide to return. For dwellers, social referents were linked to the societal discourses of how well the everyday would function should they choose to return to Finland. They wanted to maintain a realistic idea of their positionality, not idealising one place over another:

I see Finland as a place where I visit family, and where I have good memories of. But I don't see Finland as anything else than my childhood home, not my own [current] home anymore. I still love Finland, especially the nature and winter feel so much more beautiful now than I thought when I was younger [and lived in Finland]. But when I read the news, my idea of Finland gets a bit tarnished, and it feels like things are not that much better there than what they are here. (Sari, 7 years in the UK)

In dwellers' imaginaries, social and personal referents were entangled and appeared to represent their choice of leaving. Often, dwellers highlighted Finland as a place that 'used to' be their home, and that it was a great place to visit for holidays – but that it was also great to return to the UK.

Home-goers

Most home-goers had lived in the UK for 3–7 years, but some had stayed over 10, and some almost 30 years. Home-goers collectively expressed a willingness to return, despite not necessarily acting on this wish. They reflected on the aspects of the Finnish society that they missed. In this way, home-goers' social referents were, similarly to dwellers', related to the societal qualities in Finland, and Finland was seen as a fluid, forward-moving social spatiality and something home-goers would like to 'jump on board' of.

At the same time, home-goers described social and personal referents related to everyday life in the UK that they were othering against those in Finland, especially related to the mundane everydayness. Hanna, who moved four years ago, explains:

Frankly, I still feel that the Brits are a bit snobbish, compared to Finns. It is much harder to find friends here, even though I thought differently. People use small talk but don't make friends as easily... I feel the lack of space even more now. Narrow streets and the way houses are so close together make me feel anxious.

In home-goers imaginaries, the perceptions about everyday life in Finland created discourses of trust and a sense of security (Vainikka 2016) – not only on the national level but scaled up: one respondent highlighted that they did not want to 'live outside the EU', reflecting an identification to a formerly perceived 'safe space' that had been disrupted by Brexit. Home-goers narrated a feeling of being comfortable in the way of living the everyday in Finland, and in their imaginaries, Finland was seen as an 'object of emotional identification' (Vainikka 2016) perhaps in a more mundane, concrete way than in objectors' and dwellers' imaginaries.

Who am I? Positioning the self through (dis)connectedness to the everydayness in Finland

Following the everyday occurrences in Finland was of different importance for different groups, based on their idea of returning. The level on which the ‘original, timely’ sociocultural capital was maintained appeared to be functioning as a way to regulate the intensity of attachment and detachment to and from Finland. As Ryan & Mulholland (2015) point out, a desired membership in a particular group can be linked to the willingness to maintain and obtain specific socio-cultural capital.

Distancing oneself from the active, everyday life co-presences and place-specific knowledge in Finland appeared to be a prevalent theme in the objectors’ return imaginaries. Detaching themselves on a personal level (not staying ‘in the know’ of everyday routines) appeared as empowering, keeping them on their chosen path in their migration trajectory. This highlighted their decision of being independent, translocal migrants who were able to negotiate the spaces between ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ (Brickell & Datta 2011) and make preferred ‘identity choices’ (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir 2020). In objectors’ narratives, ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ appeared entangled, reflecting their identification with Finland as a symbolic, familiar space (Antonsich 2010) rather than the arena for their actual, situated domesticity. Objectors appeared to construct an idea of the self ‘there’ based on the physical features and social atmosphere that they had gotten used to in their pre-migration times and nurtured past emotional ties to maintain ways of ‘seeing’ Finland in their lives (Vainikka 2016).

It is important to note that despite the seemingly detached idea about connecting to the everydayness in Finland, the social dynamics and knowledge transfer that were produced from below – from the very core of migrants’ subjective social dynamics, like the origin of family ties – was still important. Some expressed a deep sense of connectedness to their *past* social dynamics by explaining that despite Finland not having a role in their everyday lives in the UK, they had strong emotional ties towards it:

Despite Finland not having a big role in my everyday life, it has a big role in my heart [...] I have had the chance to grow up in Finland, and I am who I am because of that. (Tuula)

These personal referents linked to past experiences stemming from respondents’ reflections about Finland’s role in their lives revealed how objectors used the ‘cumulative archive of personal spatial experience’ (Paasi 2001) in negotiating their preferred positionality in relation to the UK and Finland.

Some objectors who had arrived more recently were in the process of starting to other the familiar social referents that they had previously identified with in Finland. Sami, who had lived in the UK for three years, described that he had no intentions of returning:

I feel like I am growing apart from Finland. My everyday life is influenced by this other cultural environment [in the UK], and I don’t even speak Finnish that often anymore. I don’t have a direct link to the Finnish culture now, and I have not really even missed it. My social circles consist of mostly non-Finns. And in Finland, the winters are too dark and long, and the climate in general [is not nice].

Sami’s excerpt shows how the process of othering begins to guide the self towards the identities it feels it belongs to (Vainikka 2020). Sami’s quote also demonstrates how

othering attributes different meanings to the social and personal referents in the process of reflecting the self in relation to multiple places (Antonsich 2010).

Many dwellers, on the other hand, identified feelings of connectedness that were generated by participating in the mundane everydayness during visits, like using the Finnish language and the ‘familiar’ behaviours, re-confirming to them that they were, in fact, still part of shared cultural knowledge, but at the same time highlighting the fact that one’s ‘real life’ was somewhere else. While keeping the option open for returning, they simultaneously wanted distance that appeared to help position their sense of self:

[During visits] there is always the expectation, that you can live, for a moment, the Finnish life (which is very different here in the UK). There is always the certain holiday feeling because the ‘everyday stuff’ is not weighing one down.’ (Katariina, 6 years in the UK)

Wanting distance positioned made dwellers highlight themselves as Finns who *had left* Finland. They talked about Finland being ‘boring’ and ‘too safe an option’, but at the same time, they expressed a strong feeling of distant belonging that enabled them to ‘top up’ the familiarity and evaluate their Finnish identity by participating, momentarily, in the familiar everydayness in Finland. Dwellers appeared to temporarily ‘encapsulate their identities’ (Vainikka 2016) through ‘replenishing’ their sense of self as members of a specific group, conveying a message that their personal selves were still attached to Finland. Veera, who has lived in the UK for 10 years, describes how she has built her life in the UK with ‘social networks, work, apartment and hobbies’, and that she momentarily reflects about returning, but doesn’t see it as a very realistic plan:

It is always lovely to visit [Finland]. There is always the feeling of anticipation, and excitement about seeing family and friends and getting to live, momentarily, that Finnish life (that is so different here in the UK). And of course, a certain ‘holiday feeling’ is always attached to [visiting Finland], because there, the everyday stuff is not weighing one down.

At the same time, they highlighted the need for separation to strengthen the novelty value of themselves as Finns in the UK:

When I first moved to the UK, I thought that [Finland is] a really crappy country; its dark and cold. [...] Now I’m proud to say I’m Finnish because not everyone knows where it is, I speak a language [...] that they don’t understand and I love going to Starbucks and seeing all the different versions of how they write my name, it’s actually funny. (Leena, in the UK for 5 years)

In this way, dwellers appeared to identify with Finland using it as a ‘display’ (Antonsich 2010): through communicating their Finnishness to ‘others’ in the UK, they were able to choose an ‘in-between-identity’ that portrayed them as ‘more than local’ in the UK, but as ‘representatives’ of a place elsewhere (Vainikka 2016).

For the home-goers, the imagined connections to the everyday flows in Finland were important. For some, the activities during visits included participating in the everyday of their family members (helping out). Being able to participate was felt as important, suggesting that ‘re-establishing relationships in concrete ways’ was important and helped sustain the relationships despite the distance (Tan & Yeoh 2011).

Return as something the participants dreamed about doing – the so-called ‘someday imaginaries’ (Bolognani 2016) were expressed through narratives where home-goers imagined themselves as living the everyday in Finland and were reflecting on how they

would fit into it once there. Several mentioned missing the Finnish work-life balance and the proximity to friends and family. At the same time, they reflected on the potential difficulties in ‘fitting in’ to the Finnish society after having been away. They did, nevertheless, express willingness to connect to the Finnish society despite the everyday not always being positive:

Finland is scarier than before. I have started freaking out about the labour market and taxation. [...] This [taxation being high] is a major thing if, for example, you [family] return to Finland and your spouse won't find employment immediately. (Hanna)

Home-goers projected the time when they would ‘have to come back as a tourist’ to alleviate the foreseen sorrow of leaving the UK for Finland. It appeared that the performed return imaginary was guiding the everyday life in the UK and started to prepare one’s shifting migrant identity towards that of a returnee, despite the actual relocating being unclear. While home-goers expressed a personal willingness to return, they often mentioned it stemming from the desires of for example their spouses who, instead of a return imaginary, were nurturing a pre-migration imaginary related to Finland as they were ‘big fans of the Finnish nature and culture’. This interesting intersection between a pre-migration imaginary and a return imaginary being performed simultaneously through family members, but through different place attachments (one returning to ‘home’ and one relocating to ‘new home’) created a power narrative that would need further investigation. Home-goers appeared to strongly identify as Finns, members of a particular group, in the UK – but their perception of this membership differed from that of the dwellers in that home-goers did not seek to highlight their departure, but the distinctiveness of being connected to Finland.

Who do I want to be? Re-affirming the self through return visits

During return visits, my respondents appeared to have been reflecting on both their pre-migration times and the times that ‘would be’ in the case of returning. The accumulated perceptions related to visits ‘home’ were of great importance in the participants’ ideas of the sense of self.

Coming face to face with one’s past and present selves causes friction (Marschall 2017) and ‘reflects the connections between migrants and their environment’ (Shubin 2015). Visits provide a platform for reflecting on one’s preferred idea of the self by offering ‘conflicting experiences of difference and attachment’ (Carling & al. 2015).

Objectors expressed mixed feelings about such visits, ranging from enjoying connecting to their family and friends to feeling morally obligated to visit to satisfy family members’ expectations, a theme discussed by Mueller (2015) and Wojtyńska and Skaptadóttir (2020). Their own expectations about relaxation especially during the ‘Finnish summer’ that several interviewees in all groups highlighted as a big source of enjoyment were sometimes shadowed by having to participate in more social interactions than they felt comfortable with. Some described emotional reactions to the sensory environments in Finland during such visits, and feeling connected to the place that represented *past* familiarity:

*I start to well up because the homeland feels so 'own'. All the scents and flavours are familiar [...]
(Sirpa, in the UK for 30 years)*

Dwellers expressed nostalgic ideas about visiting Finland. On one hand, they brought up the quality discourses about Finland that enabled them to identify against it ('there is a lot of hidden racism and people are rude'), but simultaneously, they brought up qualities that they valued as having in the socio-cultural fabric that made them members of a unique group ('The Finnish society functions well, there is a lot of space, it is genuine and close to nature'). In dwellers', and objectors', return imaginaries the nostalgic, as well as undesirous, spacetimes, appeared to function as a resource – an idea of Finland as a 'breathing space' to which one could but does not have to, return. Fauser (2020), in talking about German lifestyle migrants in Turkey, similarly points out that the option of returning to one's country of origin paradoxically enables staying in one's new host country. Carling *et al.* (2015: 18) also state that 'a secure status abroad creates opportunities for return'.

Most home-goers described feeling melancholic at the end of return visits. While many mention there being moral obligations to visit, the connections to the 'familiar sensory environments' and joining a particular sociocultural pace were important:

There are certain things that I don't experience in London, one of them being the rustling of leaves in the forest... that you can't hear much here [in London]. [...] And I prefer spending holidays in Finland... Holidays in the UK are bothersome because everything is always so crowded. In Finland, the holidays are quieter. (Kirsi, in the UK for 10 years)

Through reflecting on past and future spacetimes, all groups generated place-specific emotional support structures that they used to re-affirm their sense of an independent self that knew where they came from, and where they wanted to be in their present migration trajectory. This echoes the findings of Carling *et al.* (2015), stating that the ideas of return are shaped by multiple types of attachments. It is important to note that these attachments can also be negative 'detachments' that can 'dampen the appeal of return' (Carling *et al.* 2015). These conflicts are important in the re-affirming of the sense of self, as they generate positive and negative emotional anchors within return imaginaries. Through imagined returns, all groups were able to gain a personal understanding of the perceived validity of their senses of self, and construct a subjective, imagined support structure within the larger web of imaginaries within their migration trajectories.

The return imaginaries that my participants narrated were snapshots into their current translocal lives and reflected their sense of self as it was perceived in that particular phase in their trajectories. It is notable, of course, that the idea of return is being re-negotiated as one's migration narrative continues and one re-negotiates the sense of self. In all of the three groups, I had respondents who had lived in the UK for varying lengths of time. Some explained that they had, at times, been reflecting on returning as a likely possibility, but had abandoned the idea as they had accumulated more personal referents in the UK. Others, likewise, expressed that they had not planned to return, but had had to start thinking about it as a likely option either because they wanted to, or felt obliged to, re-join their families in Finland, or because they felt it would be better for their families in the UK. However, their shifting ideas of return were not directly dependent on the duration of time they had been away from Finland, but rather on their life situation, noted also by Erdal and Ezzati (2015). They highlight that the shifting feelings of belonging are perceived differently by everybody, and depend on the

life situation within which one has decided to become a translocal migrant. This shows how the translocal sense of self considers the situatedness and temporality of social and personal referents that it identifies with.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed how translocal migrants' subjective return imaginaries enable the negotiation of the sense of self in translocal placemaking. Specifically, it has sought an answer to the question '*what is the role of return imaginaries in negotiating the sense of self if Finns' translocal place-making in the UK?*'. Two angles were discussed: positioning the self through (dis)connectedness to the everydayness in Finland, and reaffirming the self through reflecting on return visits.

For objectors, applying the preferred amount of distancing was important. This freed them to consider Finland as a resource that would be there for them should they need it, and placed them as independent migrants in their translocal trajectory. The objectors' ideas about returning reflected that of a 'rejection' or 'defensive' fantasy, discussed by Bolognani (2016) where the option to leave and return to one's country of origin 'if things go wrong' is central to one of her study participants.

Dwellers regulated their (dis)connectedness to 'replenish' their sense of self as members of a specific group in Finland and their novelty value as Finns in the UK and emphasised themselves as persons who had left Finland. For home-goers, the idea of the self as a Finn, a member of a particular group, was of great importance. They highlighted themselves as having strong connectedness to the everydayness in Finland. Their sense of self was shifting towards a returnee, fostering a mix of 'wished and intended returns' (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015).

This study contributes three important points to the interdisciplinary research on how 'middling' migrants negotiate the sense of self through return imaginaries. Firstly, by discussing a migrant group that is not very widely researched in the UK context, this study widens the understanding of Finns' migration trajectories and the way they relate to Finland in the UK. Secondly, while showing how translocal place-making considers several types of 'situated and situational' place attachments in relation to return, this research shows the simultaneous importance of the place detachments, often discussed in the shadows of place attachments. Processing detachments in Finns' migration trajectories is a central part of the negotiation of their sense of self. As Bolognani and Erdal (2017) point out, negative thinking processes do not mean less commitment to host or sending countries. Thinking about return 'points to the high intensity, reflective interaction between the personal and the external world' (Bolognani 2016).

Thirdly, the return imaginaries are formed on both social and societal, as well as personal levels. These are tangled together but enable one to negotiate the self in different ways. By offering a framework for negotiating the sense of self on societal and social levels, return imaginaries enable the identification with a collective, static familiarity that one can reflect on in terms of roots, national identity and embodied representation as a member of a particular, spatial 'us'. On a personal level, return imaginaries offer a way to evaluate one's connectedness to the mundane familiarities in several places, and reflect on one's return in relation to the places' ongoing everydayness.

Return imaginaries drive the sense of self negotiations, constantly bringing up friction in the self-place relationships. This results in the ongoing need to evaluate the

validity of one's ideas about returning. Return imaginaries can be seen as 'feedback mechanisms' (Bolognani & Erdal 2017) that keep the migrant narrative going. Despite drawing on the experiences of Finns with diverse lengths of stay in the UK, it would be intriguing to conduct a more in-depth analysis into the differences in UK-based Finns' return imaginaries over time, as well as focus more on the issues of gender bias among Finns in the UK. These are certainly topics for future research.

Endnotes

1. 'Middling migrants', according to Conradson and Latham (2005), mean migrants who move for other than economic reasons, are relatively highly educated, and possess middle class status in both their sending and destination countries.

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