INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on ongoing research which explores the experiences of children who move to Ireland with their Irish return migrant parent(s). Those in this group have been born and spent part of their childhoods in Britain, the US and elsewhere, and have moved "home" to a country with which they have strong, yet often ambiguous, ties. The paper explores the interrelation of notions of childhood, identity and place in the narratives of both the parents and the children. I argue that the notion of innocent Irish childhoods permeates their narratives of return migration. In the paper, I reflect on the ways in which both children and parents relate to this notion and on the ways in which it shapes and is shaped by return migration processes.

Previous research reveals that the decision to return among recent Irish return migrants is often explained in terms of a desire to bring up children in Ireland and a belief that Ireland is a good place in which to do so (Ní Laoire, 2008). Their narratives draw on powerful nostalgic discourses of childhood idylls and on the myth of return, in which migrants draw upon selective and idealized memories of their own Irish childhoods in order to represent Ireland as a better environment in which their children can grow up than was available in the destination society.
Their representations of Ireland reproduce a broader “quality of life” narrative in which the return migrants tend to idealize the non-material aspects of life and to deny any economic motivations for either the original emigration or return, despite a large body of research which attests to both the harsh economic conditions which contributed to high emigration in the 1980s (eg, Mac Laughlin, 1994) and the economic boom which facilitated large-scale return in the 1990s/2000s (eg, Jones, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

The research has involved working with families who have moved to Ireland, where at least one parent is Irish, and there is at least one child who took part in that move to Ireland. My methodology involves repeat visits to each family, using participative research techniques with the children and teenagers and interviews with parents. Techniques are adapted to the children’s ages, with very young children doing drawing or artwork, and older children and teenagers taking part in a self-directed photography activity. The latter activity involves giving each child a disposable camera with which to document their lives, and using the photographs they take in their own time as a springboard for discussion. So far, I have worked with thirteen families, including twenty-six children or teenagers, all in the Cork-Kerry region in southwest Ireland, including rural and suburban locations, and also including a wide spectrum of social-class positions.

CHILDHOOD, MIGRATION AND PLACE

My research has found that one of the most powerful narratives of return among return migrants is the notion of returning to a ‘safe haven’, away from the ills of modern urban lifestyles which are experienced elsewhere, involving a certain conflation of the rural with Ireland as a whole. The rural (and Western Ireland) have long held a central place in the Irish national imaginary, having been idealized as epitomizing qualities of authenticity, safety, nurturing, as well as child-like innocence, qualities which have been transferred to discourses of the nation itself (Nash, 1993). This idealization of the rural and the West has become a central part of the way in which Irishness itself has been understood and constructed, reflected for example in 20th century autobiography (Foster, 2001) and in the commodified Ireland of tourist imagery (O’Connor, 1993; Nash, 1993). It has also been closely bound up with discourses of Irish migration through its role in reproducing romantic and nostalgic notions of migration as exile from an idealized homeland (Miller, 1985). Historic discourses of emigration construct destination societies as places of moral threat to innocent young Irish migrants (Akenson, 1996; Ryan, 2002), while pervasive ideological dualisms associate Ireland with tradition, community and authenticity, in opposition to the modernity and individualism of more urban industrialized societies such as Britain and the U.S. (Duffy, 1995).

The families in this research do emphasize what they see as a less hectic lifestyle in Ireland. For example, Cait\(^2\) here is reflecting the traditional ideological dualism which opposes Ireland to the destination society. She associates Ireland with community values and simple lifestyles while England is constructed in terms of individualism and consumerism. Now a teenager, she talks here about a time when she and her family came on holiday to Ireland before moving there:

Coming to [this town] on a summer’s day and I’d go outside and I used to make friends. You can’t do that in England – have your kids running around outside. Lives are a lot more private in England – people don’t tell you things because they don’t know each other and why bother. Here people have known each other for ever. In England, people are coming and going so much, the aim is to have good job, house, car. Here people want to be happy. (Cait, age fifteen)

This representation of Ireland helps her and her family to justify their migration decision and is a central motif in their narratives of return migration.

I argue that this narrative is permeated by a particular construction of Irish childhood. Concepts of

\(^2\) All first names and surnames have been changed to protect participant anonymity.
childhood as a time of innocence, vulnerability and dependence dominate in Western society (Jenks, 1996), contributing to essentialized notions of ideal innocent childhoods and of the child as in need of protection. As geographers such as Pain (2004) and Valentine (1997) have pointed out, drawing on research in the British context, Western hegemonic ideals of childhood inform assumptions of risk which are articulated through highly spatialized discourses of fear and risk (i.e., ideas of safe and unsafe places). Valentine (1997) and Jones (1997) have explored the ways in which dominant concepts of childhood, innocence and risk intersect with particular dominant notions of rurality, contributing to the production of what Jones (1997) calls "rural childhood idylls"—the powerful idea that the country childhood is characterized by innocence, wildness, play, closeness to nature, safety and freedom. (They critique this notion by pointing to the realities of the dangers of the countryside). Helleiner (1998) highlights the influence of this discourse in Irish society in the 20th century, pointing to a widespread acceptance, reflected in the Irish Constitution’s emphasis on the centrality of "the family", that a protected childhood was a necessary foundation for adult Irish citizenship. Irish nationalist discourse of the early 20th century represented childhood as an idealized zone of innocence, connected closely to the celebration of the peasant and nostalgia for older forms of culture (Kiberd, 1995; Ferriter, 2002). This idealization of innocent Irish childhoods connects with powerful discourses of Irishness, migration, and place in the narratives of return migrants in my research, so that return is rationalized with reference to the availability in Ireland of safe and innocent childhoods for their children.

PARENTS’ AND CHILDREN’S NARRATIVES OF INNOCENT IRISH CHILDHOODS

In this paper, I explore this idea a little further with particular attention to its implications for children of return migrants. First, one of the most prominent narratives among parents is the idea that Ireland is a good place in which to bring up children because of the greater freedom, space, and safety which the children can apparently enjoy there. To what extent does this notion of freedom and safety for children cohere with the realities of their everyday experiences of return migration? Many of them have indeed moved from urbanized environments outside Ireland (such as large towns in the south of England or Boston or New York in the U.S.) to less urbanized or more rural environments or to middle-class suburban areas with plenty of green spaces. Many of the children in my research do play outdoors with neighboring children in these green areas where they are perceived to be safe while also being relatively free from adult supervision. Figure 1 shows one child’s representation of her local green.

This notion of greater freedom for the children is very important and is mentioned by many of the participants, including those living in suburban and rural areas, such as this parent, for example:

And the minute we arrived, all the children were at the door and then we didn’t see the children that week. They only came in to be fed and watered and then they were off out again, which is lovely… we actually felt a sense of, that they were safe, and it was just a nice feeling really. (Gill, parent of Sally)

Safety and "niceness" are also related to notions of closeness to nature which is perceived to be more available in Ireland than elsewhere. Images of natural landscapes come up a lot in Sally’s photos (Figure 2),
because she says, that is what she likes about Ireland. She took these photos on day trips with her family, or trips to the local park with her Dad, but her everyday environment is quite different as she lives in a suburban housing estate.

However, research with children and parents reveals narratives which also challenge these notions of safety and freedom. For example, some of the teenagers in the study claim they actually have less spatial freedom in Ireland than they had or would have had in their previous home.

Oh, don’t talk about freedom! Like it’s not even my parents’ fault, it’s not that they say you can’t go out, it’s almost it’s too much of a hassle to try and go out at night because it’s just too far and walking up the hill in the dark, it wouldn’t be safe... In [country of previous residence], at twelve, I was able to take the public transport and it was safe, yeah, and it’s like really kind of a hit... Strange, I’d more freedom when I was twelve than I have now because of the public transport systems... it hit hard... (Emma, age sixteen)

She is talking about how difficult it is for her to get out on her own because of the lack of public transport in the suburb where she lives. Her concerns are directly related to Ireland’s car-dependent environment and extremely poor provision of public transportation. So it could be argued that the issues of spatial confinement which generally affect young people living in rural areas are widespread in Ireland as a result of its dispersed settlement patterns. The spatial confinement affects these young people who have become accustomed to having more independence, and freedom, in terms of their social interactions and personal development, possibly contributing to isolation.

Children who move to rural areas also raise the issue of lack of things to do. While they may have more space in which to play, there are not necessarily any neighbors to play with, and as they get older, there is a perceived lack of social facilities for young people. In one family, who lived in a small rural town, there was a clear contradiction here between the father’s view and the children’s. The father told me that there was more to do for the children than where they had lived in England. However, his daughter, Jane, told me:

There’s nothing really fun like. There’s a park but that’s back by the sports field. That’s all we have around here. We don’t really have any other things that are fun to do. (Jane, age twelve)

In general, most of the parents, and many of the children, feel that where they live now is safer for children than where they lived previously. As a result, children do have greater spatial freedom. However, parental and children’s perceptions of risk do not always coincide, and what may seem to be a very safe and quiet rural area to parents might hold other fears for children. For example, the children in one family talked a lot about an old stone bridge which they like to walk to from their house. However, they added that they do not walk there on their own any more because of their fear of the neighbors’ dogs. In addition, what parents perceive as being a nice, quiet and safe place can be perceived by older children and teenagers as dull and boring, as we saw from twelve-year-old Jane above.

Parental constructions of risk shift as children get older and parents become more anxious about their teenagers’ growing independence and their potential encounters with alcohol and other perceived moral threats. Some parents find the high degree of spatial freedom which they desired for their children is
less appealing when it involves their teenagers. This concern seems to be associated with a discourse that comes up a number of times among parents, of a certain disapproval of what is seen as a lack of discipline towards children and youth in Ireland and an informality in relation to child/youth/family lifestyles and behaviors, as expressed by this parent:

I just think parents are more on top of their kids in the States; maybe I could be totally wrong there but I just feel that they kind of spend a bit more time with them, and they do more with them, yeah I do, I do. I think here there’s an awful lot of they’re left to fend for themselves. Maybe it’s because they have the freedom, yeah that’s well and good, but I think you have to kind of teach them manners and respect and not to be wandering around. (Barbara, parent)

So the space and freedom which is highly valued by parents for their young and pre-teen children is a source of anxiety for them when it comes to their own and others’ teenagers. This worry is reflected in a greater emphasis on parental surveillance and supervision in relation to teenagers.

INNOCENT IRISH CHILDHOODS

These notions of freedom, safety, and space and of Ireland as a refuge from the competitiveness and pace of life associated with modernity together rely on a particular dominant notion of the child as an innocent being in need of protection. This perspective becomes spatialized in the families’ narratives of return, whereby Ireland is constructed as a place where children can retain their innocence and can be children for longer than elsewhere. There is an idea that children are less sophisticated and more innocent in Ireland as well as less independent. A quote from parent Gill reflects this perspective:

We often talked about coming to live in Ireland and bringing the children up—when we’d visit the cousins [in Ireland] actually. She’s got four girls and they’re lovely and I used to say “oh it’s so nice, the Irish”, you know the way they are, the girls were lovely. I said it’d be lovely to bring your children up in Ireland... they’re just so polite, well mannered, they’re just lovely... very warm, very open, very close family... . . . It’s hard to describe it, it just seems more laidback lifestyle here... . . . It just had a nice pleasant feel about being in Ireland with children and when you meet children you know. (Gill, parent)

Interestingly, this notion does not come up just among parents but also among some of the children. For example, in this quote from Cait, she links freedom and safety with a particular view of childhood and spatializes this idea by arguing that this idealized innocent childhood is more possible in Ireland than in England.

I way prefer life over here, ’cos I’ve way more freedom, ’cos it’s safer [...] I didn’t have that much freedom at all [in England] and like my cousins [in England]... they’re just completely different to how me and my friends are. I mean... there’s still a sense of them that they’re a child, whereas I think in a lot of children in England, that’s kind of gone, because I think once you go to secondary school, bearing in mind they’re a year younger, they’re only eleven, twelve going into secondary school, they have to, they’re suddenly grownup... You only have your childhood once, so you might as well live it being whoever you want to be and doing whatever you want to do, that’s what we do... we’re all having fun most of the time . . . . (Cait, age fifteen)

However, of course, the everyday lived realities of return migration can challenge these rose-tinted views of the innocent Irish childhood. The Conway family loved the fact that as soon as they moved to Ireland, the neighboring children were calling round for the children and they could spend all day outdoors with them. However, after a short time, some issues arose involving conflict among the children and it was alleged that the Conway children were being picked on for being ’English,’ a common theme which emerged in the research. Accent and perceived nationality are markers of difference in peer networks and are often used to exclude return migrant children, sometimes featuring in instances of bullying.

A number of teenagers talked to me about having been bullied because of their accents or more generally for not being Irish. Interestingly, some of them associate this bullying and exclusion directly with the
notion of childhood innocence, claiming that Irish children are unsophisticated and as a result do not understand how to behave towards those whom they perceive as different. This representation is a way for them of making sense of the obvious contradiction between notions of innocent Irish childhoods and the lived realities of the aggressive and harmful behavior of these ‘innocent Irish children’. In this way, they can hold on to the notion of idealized Irish childhoods while explaining away this behavior in a way which also constructs their own identities as more culturally sophisticated. For example, Emma states:

I’d find some of them kind of immature but... like not in a bad way, not at all, just quite funny. [C: In what way?] Just like their views on things, like they don’t realise what they said was completely offensive to someone elseelse . . . . (Emma, age sixteen)

PRODUCTION OF NARRATIVES OF INNOCENT IRISH CHILDHOODS

So what is the ideological and lived context in which the production and reproduction of narratives of innocent Irish childhoods takes place? It surely has its roots in the ways in which Ireland is both imagined and experienced by parents and children prior to migration, but is reproduced and re-worked in the dynamics of engagement between parents and children, and through the living out of experiences of return migration.

Intergenerational dynamics

One dynamic which has emerged from this study of parental and children’s narratives is the ways in which the narratives both mirror and at times contradict each other. What struck me while doing the research was how closely parents’ and their own children’s narratives would mirror each other at times. It seems that parents strongly shape their children’s narratives by shaping their expectations, values, and even their memories. For example, when asked to talk about the best things about moving to Ireland, David (age thirteen) at first found it difficult to answer but then seemed to remember the standard response:

Em... probably [silence]... being closer to family I guess. I can’t really say anything else. Or, it’s a bit better here as well because it’s not as polluted, there’s more space, like we have a garden and there’s a lot more fields. (David, age thirteen, moved to Ireland at age twelve)

Children tend to learn and repeat standard family responses to particular questions or issues. It is only through spending time with children and young people that alternative perspectives emerge from the children which contradict these standard narratives. This difference highlights the importance of using the kinds of participative techniques with children which allow these non-standardized or non-learned narratives to emerge.

Parental memories of innocent Irish childhoods

It follows, therefore, that a very significant element of the production of these narratives of innocent Irish childhoods comes from the ways in which parents remember their own childhoods. For the Irish-born parents in the research, very often their own Irish childhoods are remembered selectively—with an element of romanticization, as with Kate below who remembers an idyllic rural childhood (while glossing over the admitted boredom). She goes on to say that she and her husband wanted the same type of childhood for their own children.

It was a farm, so!! We didn’t get television till I was about ten, so before that we just played outside a lot, and did all the farm work—there was turf and there was hay to be cut in summertime and the animals to be fed and that. So basically we led a very happy family life. We used to get bored because we were miles from any other kids, you know just farming... but you know we had a nice quiet life growing up really.

[And later in the same interview:] We both grew up on farms and I suppose we wanted the children to have the same. (Kate, parent)
These narratives therefore play a big role in decision-making around return migration, contributing to parents’ decisions to move back, ostensibly to allow their children to have a particular type of childhood. Parents reproduce the narratives when they talk about the freedom and safety that their children enjoy now that they have moved back, and the children themselves reproduce them in conversations about living in Ireland.

Imagined Ireland

The influence of parents on the children’s narratives is intertwined with other more widely available representations of Ireland on which they can draw. The commodified and romanticized Ireland of tourist promotion and dominant diasporic discourses does emerge in the children’s narratives. Here Cait refers to her pre-migration imaginings of Ireland, even using the term “fairytale”, and states that the reality did live up to this idealization.

I used to think Ireland was so cool, like a fairytale, so unbusy...

C: Did Ireland live up to your expectations?

Yes. Because the field behind our house had hay bales—like a dream! And tractors and all the cows! I never lived in a place where there were cows and tractors. People really did go to school on tractors. When I moved over here first, it was like a fairytale! So people do actually own pet cows. And the roads. It was so novel! (Cait, age fifteen).

It is striking how frequently stereotypical commoditized representations of Ireland do recur among the children, although simultaneously they also produce other representations of their own everyday lives in Ireland which would not be out of place in any modern Western family setting.

CONCLUSIONS: THE INTERRELATION OF NOTIONS OF CHILDHOOD, IDENTITY AND PLACE

On the one hand, ideologies of ‘tradition versus modernity’ and global constructs of Ireland as a pre-modern and safe haven from modernity, contribute to narratives of return migration as a return to a rural idyll. These ideologies about Ireland intersect with contemporary hegemonic Western discourses of childhood, involving notions of innocence and vulnerability, contributing to the production of narratives of innocent Irish childhoods.

These are reproduced and reworked within return migrant families through intergenerational dynamics and lived experiences of return migration. Through these narratives, parents are in part telling a particular return migration story—a story of successful migrants returning to Ireland for a better quality of life for their children.

However, lived experiences also challenge idealized notions of Ireland and of Irish childhoods. Counter-narratives emerge in conversations with both children and parents. The greater spatial freedom and sense of community of children’s lifestyles in Ireland, together with the perception of innocence associated with these aspects of life, are undermined by the lived reality of what is seen from another perspective as lack of parental protection and discipline over children and lack of tolerance towards difference.

Lived experiences of return migration challenge narratives of innocent and free Irish childhoods for both parents and children, which means the narratives are adjusted and adapted but are still used to justify the return move, by both parents and children alike. These notions not only shape return migration by providing justifications for it which ostensibly have children’s needs at their core, but they also influence future return migrations by becoming part of the folklore of return among diasporic networks. Children’s and their parents’ lived experiences of migration sometimes generate counter-narratives but also, surprisingly, result in the initial narratives’ reproduction and fortification. Looking at family migration experiences in this way reveals the contradictions in common migration success stories and highlights the importance of research which probes these narratives and allows counter-narratives to emerge.
REFERENCES