
Understanding the motivations for return migration in Australia



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Abstract

Background

Return migration is often overlooked by traditional analyses of internal migration. Why people return has received even less scrutiny. Relatively few migrants make a return move, so there is clearly something noteworthy about these people and their circumstances that trigger such a move.

Aims

This paper explores why people make return moves in Australia.

Data and methods

Migration histories were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews; content analysis of interview transcripts was undertaken.

Results

People return for a wider range of reasons than is indicated by neoclassical economic theory. Some of the moves are linked to significant life events such as post-school education and employment. Returns also occur for less tangible factors such as amenity and climate, connections to family, friends and the extent to which a place “feels like home” are equally important.

Conclusions

A broader explanatory framework is required to explain why people return. The integration of migrant stories into more traditional migration analyses enriches the story of internal migration.

Key words

Internal migration; return migration; motivations; Australia.

1. Introduction

Australia's internal migration system is complex, comprising many types of moves over differing spatial and temporal scales. One type of move that is usually overlooked by traditional analyses is that of return migration. It is the event where people who moved to a new place of residence return to live at their former home or region at a later date (Bell and Hugo 2000). In some contexts it can be better conceptualised as part of circular migration rather than a discrete form of migration in its own right. Return migration acts as a counterbalance to the dominant direction of migration flows between areas, and previous research has established that return migrants are a distinctly different group compared with other migrants in terms of both their demographic character and motives for moving (Da Vanzo and Morrison 1981; Long 1988; Newbold and Liaw 1990). Our understanding of return migration is bound by the data used to observe it. In Australia this is the census, and returns to a previous place of residence are observed over the five-year intercensal period. But returns may occur after an absence almost as long as a life span. While the use of geo-political boundaries can obscure its true spatial extent, migration must cover a sufficiently large distance to change the activity space within which a person functions on a daily basis (Boyle et al. 1998; Parr 2018).

Five dimensions (intensity, who moves, where, when and why) are recognised as fundamental perspectives in migration studies (Bell 1992; Long 1988), but one dimension, 'why people move', has received far less scrutiny than the other four. Given that relatively few migrants make a return move (Bell 1996a; Parr 2018), there is clearly something noteworthy about such individuals and the specifics of their circumstances that trigger such a move. Drawing on the results of a recently completed analysis of return migration in Australia (Parr 2018), this paper begins to fill out the missing "why" in the return migration story.

The paper begins with a summary of recent research on the motivations for return migration. It then outlines the explanatory framework, the dataset and methods used in the analysis. The body of the paper recounts the stories of a group of Australian residents who have made return moves. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of the findings for both migration theory and methods.

2. Background

Substantial insight into the motivations for return has derived from studies of international migration, particularly the movement of labour migrants (Lidgard and Gilson 2002; Reagan and Olsen 2000; Stalker 1994). Comparatively little has been written in relation to internal migration, although the reasons for international and internal returns appear to have many similarities. King (1996) found there are many reasons, which change over the life course. A Swedish study looking at people who returned to rural areas where they grew up is the most comprehensive so far (Amcoff and Niedomysl 2013; Niedomysl and Amcoff 2010). Return migrants were more likely to report social reasons for moving than reasons related to employment or education. Moving close to friends was important for divorcees and people returning to sparsely populated areas. Studies of the impact of out-migration from rural Scotland found that people return for a range of personal and employment-related reasons (Stockdale 2002, 2006). Other work reveals a multiplicity of motivations to return, with social connections a major factor (Alexander 2005; Bijker et al. 2012; Stockdale 2006; Wang and Fan 2006).

An Australian study of young people who returned to Tasmania noted the importance of lifestyle and being close to family (Easthope 2006). Having a sense of community and belonging, or 'a place to call home' appears to influence the decision to return (Stockdale 2002).

Return moves may be linked to significant life events. In this paper such events are categorised into four types: economic, education, family-related and ageing. But if life events alone are responsible, the probability of returning would be considerably higher than is observed in Australia (Parr 2018). The reasons for return must therefore be much broader in scope than those offered by the traditional neoclassical framework, which has been criticised for not adequately explaining the reasons for internal migration (Long 1991). They may range from macro-scale social, political and economic forces to micro-scale individual behaviour and preferences. The emphasis here is to gain an understanding of the motivations of the individual migrant, which can change over the life course (Jeffery and Murison 2011; King 1996; Lundholm et al. 2004).

This study draws upon four explanatory frameworks to understand the motivations for return. A life course perspective has been combined with Lee's push–pull model (Lee 1966), Wolpert's (1965) place utility model and Faist's (2000) theory of meso-scale factors to argue that significant life events, in combination with other factors, will result in return migration. People tend to migrate to familiar places (Boyle et al. 1998 p. 64) and the personal ties, familial ties and social networks that connect a migrant in some way to a place where they have lived in the past will have an additional strong pull (Mulder and Malmberg 2014). This paper proposes that such meso-scale considerations are just as important as other factors in explaining the selective nature of return migration. They create connections or moorings that act more strongly to draw a migrant back to a previous place of residence than other factors that would have them move to a new location.

3. Data and Methods

Motivational factors associated with internal migration are seldom captured in traditional data sources (Stillwell and Garcia Coll 2000). In particular, Bell (1995) pointed to the lack of information about why people move as a major deficiency of Australia's census. Most previous studies of return migration have inferred the reasons from migrant characteristics (Bell 1996b; Currie and Hallie 1988; Long 1988) and it is only recently that research has begun to look at this directly. Understanding more about the motivations for return migration can only be achieved by looking elsewhere to alternate data sources. This study has taken an important step by using detailed migration histories to examine this issue directly.

Qualitative research methodologies that study human behaviour and the social world are used to understand why people move. This paper reports on information from the migration histories of 22 people who returned to a former place of residence from elsewhere in Australia. Applying a purposive sampling approach, the study participants were recruited from the 50+ registry of the Ageing Mind Initiative at the University of Queensland, and networks at the New South Wales Department of Planning and Environment. Eligible participants had changed residence in Australia at least twice, with one of these moves being a return to a place they had lived in sometime in the past. No constraint was placed on the type of place to which they returned, such as the participant's place of birth or where they grew up. But any change of residence had to be of at least six months'

duration and across a sufficiently large distance to alter the spatial patterns of the participant's day-to-day life. The size of the study group ensured that the diverse range of behaviours and underlying motivations would be revealed from the migration histories. This group was not selected as a representative sample of return migrants in Australia.

Detailed migration histories and associated stories about people's lives were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire. Participants recounted the places they had lived in from birth to the time of the interview, and the life events or other circumstances associated with any moves. As an aide memoire, a life grid (Bell 2005) was concurrently used during each interview to create a written record of information provided. A content analysis of the interviews revealed the migration pathways of these people, a wealth of information about the life events linked with these moves, and the underlying motivations as recounted in the migrant's own words. Information from the interviews was indexed and categorised to identify both similarities and differences. This did not follow a pre-set coding frame, but one that was developed while reviewing the transcripts (Flowerdew and Martin 2005). The study group ranged in age between 25 and 88 years and lived throughout Australia, including metropolitan regions and smaller towns (see Figure 1). Up until the time of the interviews, the 22 migrants had made more than 230 moves in total, including 55 returns.

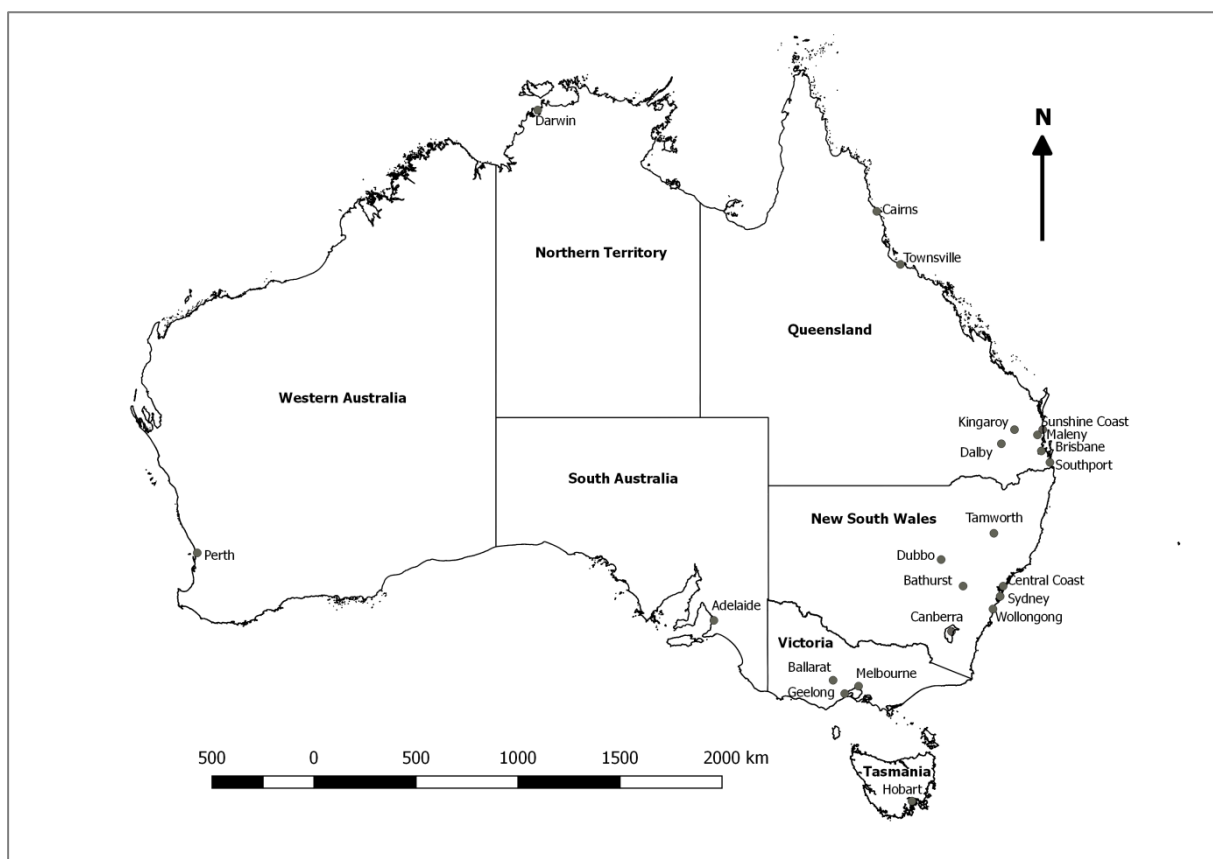


Figure 1: Reference map of places where study participants lived at the time of interview

Source: the author

4. Results: reasons why people return

The migration histories used in this study revealed the complex nature of human mobility and the extent to which changes of residence affected, or conversely were influenced by events, people and places. The names of all participants cited here have been changed to maintain anonymity; their age given in the text was as at the time of the interview.

Economic Factors

Family and economic factors were the most frequently stated reasons for return. Economic factors related mainly to employment, but employment was seldom the only reason for a return move – multiple reasons could be identified. A job often facilitated the return, rather than being the key reason for it and often explained a considerable time lag between the decision to move, and the actual return.

Transfers with the same employer facilitate returns. William, now 58 years old, moved frequently with his job in the armed forces to military bases scattered across Australia. His employer had an expectation that staff would move about every couple of years, sometimes returning to a previous posting. Natalie was one of the more mobile young people interviewed. She moved several times between Melbourne and Canberra, with the first return to Canberra occurring after graduation. She found work using networks:

‘I had a casual job when I was studying and basically, I just walked straight back into that. So, I made sure I had that before I moved back and just moved back into the job. So, I guess it wasn’t [about going] back ... unemployed and looking for a job. I went back to that casual job and then started looking for a permanent job when I got back there.’ (Natalie, 33)

Previous research concluded that return migrants were often unemployed (Morrison and Da Vanzo 1986). This was not evident from the interviews undertaken for this study. Being unemployed may have contributed to the decision to return, but people were seldom unemployed when they moved; many had already found a job.

Housing was another economic factor, especially for younger participants. Natalie’s recent move back to Melbourne had motives other than a job transfer:

‘I had planned to get into the property market for a while. I’d wanted to buy a house and it was a bit out of my reach in Canberra, whereas Melbourne offered quite more options in that respect. So that was, I guess, my main motivation.’ (Natalie, 33)

Economic necessity has forced some people to return. Melanie was a young professional living in Sydney who moved home in her mid-thirties because:

‘... I was pregnant ... There was no maternity leave. ... There was no income going to be coming in, so ... no way of supporting myself. I’m a single mum. So, it wasn’t planned [that I] move home with Mum and Dad at 38. That’s the last thing I wanted to do ... [but] I need their support at this point in time with babysitting and everything.’ (Melanie, 41)

Family-related

A variety of family-related reasons featured strongly in the decision to return. Naomi returned to Melbourne with her husband after several years in Brisbane because:

'... we were at the point in our life where we were starting to think about having kids. And we decided that it would be best to be around family ... for the support network. ... The only thing that would have kept us [in Brisbane] would have been if my mum and dad had moved up.' (Naomi, 33)

Faye grew up in regional Victoria and moved numerous times. Her first return to Ballarat was at the age of 35 with her young family, because of her ageing parents.

'We needed to be closer to them ... They came and looked at some places [in Melbourne] but they didn't want to come. They didn't want to move.' (Faye, 82)

Returns have also taken place because people missed family and wanted to see them more often, or as in the case of Ellen, because they were homesick.

'I came back to Melbourne because I was really homesick. I didn't really adjust to Sydney very well ... A lot of bullying, a lot of hostility, it was quite bizarre.' (Ellen, 48)

Education

The third dimension, education, was a contributing factor when people returned as younger adults. Ellen first left Melbourne aged 20 to follow a boyfriend to Sydney but returned a few years later to start a writing course at Deakin University. Thelma left Brisbane in her early twenties to attend Bible College in Melbourne but returned a few years later to complete her accountancy qualification. Wendy returned to Brisbane because of a desire to send her children to the same school that she had attended.

'I enrolled my girls [at my old high school] when they were very young; I wanted them to get a good education, to get more attention based on their merit rather than socio-economic disadvantage.' (Wendy, 56)

Ageing

Returns related to ageing did not feature as much as expected; and returns were usually made to care for elderly parents, rather than because the return migrants themselves were aged. As well wanting to put her children through high school, Wendy returned to Brisbane to help care for her elderly mother.

'I've got two brothers who are really busy. ... So, there's no one really to look after mum and rather than park her in a home, which we didn't want to do, it was about meeting her needs, and meeting my girls' [education] needs [at the same time].' (Wendy, 58)

Erin was one of the few cases whose return was a lifestyle choice related to ageing, rather than a necessity. In 2003 she moved with her young family to Adelaide to live closer to her father. Although only in their early forties, Erin and her husband were starting to think about where they wanted to be living, as they got older. They decided to settle in Adelaide until

‘One day my husband came home and said, “You know what, I don’t imagine retiring down here [in Adelaide]” ... so he started looking for a job and six months later we moved back to Sydney’. (Erin, 47)

The migration histories of the oldest study participants support Litwak and Longino’s (1987) findings that the onset of age-related disability does not result in return migration. Returns had occurred some years earlier, in early retirement. The most recent moves were generally local moves into aged care facilities.

Ties to place

A variety of factors were consistent with Faist’s (2000) meso-scale explanations for return. The links to family and friends who remained behind were a particularly strong motivator. Karen was a young child when her parents moved the family to Dubbo, a regional city in central New South Wales. But the family soon returned to Sydney.

‘... [My parents] missed family and friends, and both their parents were getting on and my grandparents were getting sick, ... so they wanted to go back ... They were thinking that they needed to return home to be closer with the family there.’ (Karen, 46)

Family and friends can take pressure off the return move, providing a place to stay or some other form of support as migrants settle back in after a return move. Links with other networks, particularly social ones or with previous employers also made resettling an easier process. Erin and her family found their return from Adelaide to Sydney easier “... because we kept all the relationships going with friends and stuff. We just started up with where we left off.” (Erin, 47)

Another strong theme to emerge was the sense that the place to which people had returned was somewhere that was very familiar and where they felt happy. Such places were often where people had grown up. Thinking about the places she had lived other than Sydney, Karen remarked:

‘Sydney felt like home ... the surroundings [in Cairns and the Central Coast] were so different to what I remember in Sydney as a child. I think your understanding of a place starts from when you’re a child and yeah, as you get older that anchors you to the way you think and react to certain things and I think that’s – it just was different ... This isn’t where I grew up. This isn’t my familiar place’ (Karen, 46)

Having ties to a place, or a sense of identity, was a strong theme that featured repeatedly, among migrants of all ages.

‘Melbourne is my home; it’s where my friends and family are’ (Leslie, 58)

'Melbourne's my home and I love my footy' (Ellen, 48)

'Sydney is always home' (Vivian, 59)

'Once a Queenslander, always a Queenslander' (Henry, 74)

Karen is also an example of someone whose ties to a place carried across the generations. Although she had many good memories of living in Dubbo:

'My parents brought the family back to Sydney because Dubbo didn't feel like home. They never felt at home there. ... So yeah, back to where they felt was home. ... the job promotion [in Dubbo] was good, young children, cheaper housing, all those things, but they just felt they wanted to come back home to the bigger city.' (Karen, 46)

Amenity

Another strong consideration was amenity. Natalie's frequent returns to Canberra were not just about work or education:

'I really liked the lifestyle in Canberra. I was living quite far out of the [central] city in Melbourne, so I was really feeling the distance and the lack of convenience which is not an issue at all in Canberra. ... I guess I'm not much of a city person so [Canberra]'s got a country atmosphere but with all the advantages of living in a city ... if you do feel the need for a bit of city contact, you've got Sydney just up the road as well. So, I feel like Canberra's very well-placed in a lot of respects ... it had everything I could want ... And I actually liked the weather as well, despite what everyone says about it.' (Natalie, 33)

Sharon (56) moved between Melbourne and Darwin on several occasions, for a series of short-term and contract jobs. Two reasons had her looking back to these two cities time and again. The Melbourne seaside suburb in which she lived had a comfortable familiarity, a sense of being home. Many locals also had similar values to her. The other factor, common to both Darwin and Melbourne, was her affinity with the natural environment. She loved being near the ocean and living in neighbourhoods with lots of palm trees. On another occasion, Sharon had lived in Canberra but soon returned to Melbourne because "... two to three years was enough. I was disoriented as I was too far away from the sea."

The climate of a location was mentioned by other participants as an influence on the decision to return. For example, William and his wife were happy to have a return posting to Darwin as they liked the city's climate. But climate could also push people away, encouraging a return to a previous place of residence. In 2009 Leanne and her husband moved from Perth to Brisbane to be with their granddaughter but left two years later because "it rained all the time ... so we were glad to come back to Perth. The weather played a huge part on our decision to come back" (Leanne, 55).

Another reason why Karen's parents brought their young family back to Sydney from Dubbo was that they did not like the temperature extremes.

'Summer, Dad used to say was stinking hot and the winter freezing, and they remembered the toilet would block up, it would freeze.' (Karen, 46)

Other factors

Besides climate, a desire for a change of pace can underpin a return move. Thelma spent more than 20 years living in Sydney and was finally able to return home to Brisbane with her family:

'I married a Sydney fellow. I produced three Sydney children. And there was no way, even though I would have loved to come back to Queensland, there was no way I would have initiated that. I didn't feel I had the right, to do that. But my husband was a service technician and he was driving all over Sydney. It drove him barmy and he wanted to get out.' (Thelma, 72)

For her part, Karen was very pleased to return to Sydney:

'I was very happy to move back to Sydney because I grew up there and it was familiar and it was convenient and I was young and I had the culture and the food and the shops and my work friends and that whole lifestyle. It was good.' (Karen, 46).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to supplement the often overlooked, but now growing, body of work about the reasons for return migration. Migration histories are a rich source of information concerning return moves of people living in Australia. Findings revealed that people return for a wider range of reasons than is indicated by neoclassical economic theory and support the suggestions from other researchers (Bell and Hugo 2000; Cromartie and Stack 1989) that a broader more inclusive conceptual framework is needed to explain the selectivity of people who return. The framework used in this paper, which combines a life course framework with macro-scale and meso-scale explanations, is a good starting point.

Results reveal that the reasons why people make a return move are as varied as the people themselves. Some of the moves are linked to significant life events such as post-school education and employment. Returns are also linked to other, less tangible, factors such as amenity and climate. The connections to family, friends and other networks and the extent to which a place "feels like home" are just as important. These less tangible factors are much harder to measure using conventional data sources and are outside the realm of the frameworks normally used to explain return migration in developed countries such as Australia. The meso-scale framework developed by Faist (2000) is a very useful way to explain more of the reasons for return migration revealed in the migration histories.

The motivations for return have similarities with the motives for internal migration in general. Work is not always a critical reason for moving in either case. Social and environmental considerations are important and the reasons for moving can be complicated. Some of the motivations revealed in this paper may also explain why return migrant selectivity is not always distinct. The reasons for the

return may bear no connection to the socio-demographic character of the return migrant. For example, returning to care for elderly or sick family members may not be related to age, gender, occupation or income. It may have more to do with the strength of family ties and a sense of duty to care for others in the family.

The histories used in this study were not intended to be representative of the people and patterns revealed by census analyses. Rather, the aim was to illustrate what could be revealed about return migration in Australia using alternative methods and different data sources. The collection of migration histories is always fraught with issues. Difficulties with recall of the timing of events were evident with some of the older participants and post-facto rationalisation of the choices people make is a known problem. It has been suggested that people look at their past with rose-tinted glasses to justify their decisions. There is no obvious way to get around this, but these issues need to be recognised. Limitations aside, the wealth of information provided by migration histories demonstrates that this is an extremely rich source of data about return migration. It also complements the precision of quantitative analysis habitually undertaken by demographers and population geographers. The value of integrating this material with the findings derived from conventional census-based analyses is strongly encouraged and broadens our understanding of Australia's internal migration system.

Key messages

- Understanding why people return to a place helps explain the patterns of movement.
- The reasons why people make a return move are as varied as the people themselves.
- A job is not the only reason why people return. Some returns are linked to significant life events. Ties to place, family and friends, the climate and environment are also important factors.
- That a place "feels like home" is also an important reason why people return.
- Migration histories are a rich source of information about why people return. They enhance research that traditionally relies on data from Australia's census.

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