**From Lifestyle Migration to Lifestyle *in* Migration: Categories, concepts and ways of thinking**

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*Abstract*

This article argues that analytical concepts used in migration (and other) research are most effectively employed empirically when their methodological underpinnings, and the nature of their development, are fully understood. Inductively-designed conceptual frameworks developed through long-term qualitative research are useful ways of (re)thinking migration that can free researchers from the constraints of externally-imposed frameworks, categories and conceptualisations. In order to make this argument, we use the concept of lifestyle migration and consider closely the ways in which this term was developed, not to capture a discrete or homogenous category of migrants, but rather as an analytical tool and an alternative way of thinking about migration. Drawing impetus from a close examination of a specific attempt to operationalise lifestyle migration in quantitative research, we are led to consider the political and governance implications of using (migration) labels, and the overlaps and synergies between types of migration understood as practices informed by meanings and understandings. Here, we specifically explore, on the one hand, how economic factors intersect with lifestyle in migration and, on the other hand, the role of lifestyle as imagination, aspiration and way of living in other migration processes not necessarily labelled lifestyle migration.

**1. Introduction**

Lifestyle migration has developed as a way of thinking about some forms of migration, most often that of the relatively affluent and relatively privileged (see for example Benson and O’Reilly 2009a; Hoey 2005, 2006; Knowles and Harper 2009). As a conceptual framework it focuses specifically on the motivations behind such migrations—broadly described as the search for a better way of life—while also adopting an approach to migration that considers it a process rather than a one-off act completed upon entry into the destination. Hoey captures this focus on motivations and process clearly in the following quotation, ‘[F]or life-style migrants, the choice made of *where* to live is consciously, intentionally also one about *how* to live …’ (2005: 615). Against this background, it becomes clear that lifestyle migration is not intended to identify, demarcate and define a particular group of migrants, but rather to provide an analytical framework for understanding some forms of migration and how these feature within identity-making, and moral considerations over how to live. This focus on motivations and process demonstrates that the conceptualisation of lifestyle migration differs from some other conceptual approaches to migration that might take their lead from the social and/or economic characteristics of a migrant group (such as labour migration or retirement migration). In consequence, it difficult to devise and think of the proxies that might be to measure lifestyle migration; in the absence of social or economic characteristics this is not a concept that readily lends itself to use in quantitative data collection and analysis.

How lifestyle migration has developed as a concept and put to work within research on migration is the starting point of the article. In this way we illustrate the value of the concept but also reflect on its limitations. Reflecting on a recent attempt to operationalise this concept within quantitative data analysis (Huete et al. 2013), we elaborate a more general argument: that concepts may only be effectively employed in empirical research when their methodological underpinnings, and the nature of their development, are fully understood. Such reflections give pause for thought, not least because they provide the opportunity to think more systematically about what is invoked when a term such as lifestyle migration is employed, but also lay the groundwork for thinking about how its usefulness within migration studies more broadly.

The approach we take in this article is to deconstruct and reconstruct lifestyle migration in response to three foci: (1) the political and governance implications of using labels; (2) the significance of *relative* affluence and privilege within lifestyle migration; and (3) how to better understand the role(s) played by lifestyle *in* migration. These foci allow us to engage with methodological questions about conducting migration research; to illustrate that the concept of lifestyle migration does not preclude the possibility of economic factors; to demonstrate that relative privilege may co-exist with precarity and vulnerability in ways that *absolute* understandings of wealth, privilege and affluence might render invisible; and to make clear how lifestyle migration as a way of thinking may be usefully engaged in understanding other forms of migration. In this way, we not only call for conceptual clarity in the use of lifestyle migration within research, but also lay the foundations for further dialogue and conversation about the recognition of the role(s) of lifestyle within migration processes.

**2. Lifestyle migration: a conceptual framework**

Lifestyle migration as a concept offers a way of thinking about migration—in particular, about what migration *means* to some migrants in some places—that draws attention to the fact that lifestyle appears to be a main motivation in some migrations. The use of the concept of lifestyle here intends to indicate how the apparent ‘free choice’ to pursue a particular way of living through migration identified these migrations as central to identity-making projects, the migrants themselves distinct in their structural positioning as people who can approach migration as a form of consumption in contrast to the production orientation attributed to most other migration flows (see also Benson and Osbaldiston 2014; Benson 2015). These concerns are in part reflected in the now ubiquitous definition of lifestyle migration as the migration of ‘relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently of temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life’ (Benson and O’Reilly 2009a: 621). There is a vibrant field of research on lifestyle migration, and within this studies have examined a range of populations and destinations (e.g. Griffiths and Maile 2014; Hoey 2014; Torkington 2010; Janoschka and Haas 2014).

**2.1 Lifestyle migration and its others**

Our first point of consideration is how lifestyle migration as a conceptual framework, an analytical tool relates to other, cognate concepts. There are other concepts with which it is often confused and from which it would benefit from working in closer dialogue with. Indeed, thinking about what value these might add to developing broader understandings of these migrations, or in building practice stories—aimed at revealing the structuration processes involved within these (O’Reilly 2012)—would be useful and productive exercises that might easily fill the pages of a journal article. For the purposes of the current paper, we provide a very brief overview of these concepts as a way of setting out the distinctiveness of lifestyle migration as an analytical tool. In particular we focus here on counterurbanisation and amenity migration.

A good starting point for considering how lifestyle migration relates to these other concepts and social phenomena that they describe is Mitchell’s (2004) review article examining the scope of counterurbanisation research. As she argues, counterurbanisation is a ‘chaotic concept’ (p.21), indicating at one and the same time a phenomenon of deconcentrated settlement, a spatial process, and also a type of migration movement. It is the development of research on the last of these that has the most in common with lifestyle migration (see Benson and O’Reilly 2009a: 614-615 for further discussion). The focus on representations of place—notably in the case of counterurbanisation, the rural idyll—the appeal of particular landscapes, and how these figure within the motivations behind migration, is undoubtedly at the root of the ongoing discussions about the significance of place and how this interacts with migrant subjectivities that characterise some research on lifestyle migration. Indeed, the socio-cultural construction of particular places as representing a better way of life (see for example Buller and Hoggart 1994) and the narrative of escaping the urban through migration prominent in the counterurbanisation literature, remain pivotal themes within contemporary lifestyle migration research (see for example Benson 2011; Osbaldiston 2012, 2014; Benson and Osbaldiston 2014). Destinations are often valued because of the contrast they offer to what was left behind, their natural and cultural environments significant because of what these offer by way of improving quality of life. Where lifestyle migration has innovated is in exploring how these representations of place, valued by migrants, intersect with ongoing identity-making projects (see for example Benson 2010, 2011; Knowles and Harper 2009; Korpela 2009, 2010); in other words, how place becomes inherent to the (re)construction of migrant identities.

The predominant emphasis of amenity migration—a concept that seems to have developed concurrently with lifestyle migration, with the seminal article in this field by Gosnell and Abrams (2009) published in the same year as Benson and O’Reilly’s (2009) article on lifestyle migration—has been on how migration variously intersects with rural development and transformation (Gosnell and Abrams 2009). While it is clear that environment—and what it represents—is an important driver of migration, the focus of work in this area tends to be on trends and flows and how these are evidence of wider spatial processes at work. As a consequence, research in this area rigorously considers the impacts of such migrant populations on local cultures, economies and environments (Moss 2006; Moss and Glorioso 2014). Thinking about the work that amenity migration as a concept does then reveals that it adopts a perspective on migration that privileges ideas of population movement and change, identifying trends within this. Both counterurbanisation and amenity migration offer insights into the wider structural changes that bring about demographic change in sending and receiving communities, but also how these population movements impact on the destination. These undoubtedly render visible some of the wider contexts (social, economic, political) within which lifestyle migrants move, and that are often overlooked within lifestyle migration research.

As Gosnell and Abrams (2009) identify—citing research by Hoey (2005, 2006), Jacob (1997) and Hines (2007)—research on lifestyle migrants contributes another perspective into the equation: the foci on migrant motivations and relocation stories. These distinctive foci are characteristic of lifestyle migration research, which has a view to how these intersect with moral projects about how to live that are inherently connected to identity-making (see for example Benson 2011; Osbaldiston 2012; Hoey 2014). In contrast to counterurbanization and amenity migration, the concept of lifestyle migration has a distinct and pointed focus that examines changing identities through migration, adopting social theory as a tool to make sense of the rich ethnographic data that much research in this area has been based on.

What this brief review makes clear is that counterurbanization, amenity migration and lifestyle migration are analytical tools that ask and provide answers to different questions. It is for this reason that might usefully be employed within practice stories (O’Reilly 2012). Importantly, these foci are the product of the different intellectual, methodological and theoretical traditions underpinning research. Amenity migration and counterurbanisation, at least in their contemporary rendering, emerge out of demography (or population studies) and geography, and therefore have a tendency to focus on place and to use methods of enquiry that include surveys and structured interviews. In contrast, lifestyle migration research originates the interpretivist traditions of much qualitative and ethnographic research, focussing on people (rather than places) and revealing of the identity-making projects that are embedded in these migrations. It I perhaps unsurprising then that, understood as analytical tools they do very different work. Nevertheless, in moving towards practice stories, as advocated by O’Reilly (2012), these cognate fields of research have a lot to offer; they provide clear considerations of a range of structures that create the opportunities for lifestyle migration to take place to particular localities in ways that might otherwise be overlooked through the lens on individual migrants so common in lifestyle migration research.

**2.2 The development of an inductive concept**

The development of the concept of lifestyle migration can be understood as having followed Becker’s advocation of ‘developing concepts … in a continuous dialogue with empirical data’ (1998: 109), emerging from the bottom up, inductively, through the—often ethnographic—research process (see Benson and O’Reilly 2009a & b; Hoey 2005, 2006; Knowles and Harper 2009)1. The starting point of these studies was interpretivist, the research guided by questions asking what does migration *mean* to those involved? The concept was therefore the product of a particular research process, reflecting the contexts in which research was taking place. We argue here that these conceptualisations of lifestyle migration be understood as starting points in a dialogue about the role of lifestyle in migration, a way of saying something sociological about certain migration trends. Furthermore, there is a need for further development and refining of the concept to explore whether and how lifestyle migration might be valuable as an analytical tool and its limitations.

On face value lifestyle migration indicates that there are forms of migration where considerations over lifestyle—deliberately intended in its sociological rendering, framed around consumption, and inferring existential and moral dimensions—is prioritised in migration decisions. Lifestyle in this rendering becomes a motivation, one explanation of why people want to move and what they expect from their migration. What is clear is that for the relatively affluent migrants who are often the focus of research on lifestyle migration, the possession of assets and resources (e.g. financial capital from incomes, pensions, savings and property ownership), alongside the ease of movement resulting from relative privilege (e.g. the possession of passports from relatively powerful countries) provides opportunities to realise these motivations.

Crucially, however, the concept of lifestyle migration pivots around the common narrative through which these migrants render their lives meaningful (Benson and O’Reilly 2009a; O’Reilly and Benson 2009). What this allows is for this narrative to be told by a variety of people belonging to categories that might otherwise be considered as distinct migration trends, including retirement migrants, downsizers, backpackers, and second-home owners. This renders lifestyle migration:

… a complex and nuanced phenomenon, varying from one migrant to another, from one location to the next. It holds at its core social transformation and wider processes; it is at once an individualized pursuit and structurally reliant and it is a response to practical, moral and emotional imperatives. (O’Reilly and Benson 2009: 11)

The concept of lifestyle migration further allows for the recognition of the complexity of the migration decision and post-migration lives. In this presentation, lifestyle migrants share ‘several themes important in common, albeit with disparate threads’ (O’Reilly and Benson 2009: 1), with lifestyle migration ‘… not intended to flatten motives to a single dimension … [but one that] also acknowledges the inseparability of economic factors like income, and the quality of life it supports’ (Knowles and Harper 2009: 11). Recognising the problematic nature of the diverse labels that have been used for migrants from economically developed countries, who are described variously as elite, privileged, skilled, or transient migrants (e.g. Amit 2007), Knowles and Harper (2009) present lifestyle migration as an alternative way of thinking about migration. They do not intend it as another category, but instead acknowledge the ‘slack and slippage in terminology’: that some legal migrations can end up undocumented when people overstay their permits; that skilled migrants are also economic migrants; and that those fleeing poverty and starvation are often also relatively skilled. Lifestyle migration, then, is a way of thinking about some forms of migration and not an attempt to homogenize discrete categories. It is *a lens rather than a box*.

**2.3 The limitations of an inductive concept**

Such an inductive concept is understandably difficult to operationalise for use in quantitative research. The concept refers specifically to motivations—the search for a better way of life—qualitative and subjective understandings of migration, rather than to the social and/or economic characteristics that are ordinarily measured by survey and census data. Here we examine a specific attempt (Huete et al. 2013) to operationalise lifestyle migration within quantitative analysis to provide a frame for the argument presented in this article.

A recent article by Huete et al. (2013) presents a quantitative analysis of the effects of the global economic crisis—and the related Spanish economic crisis—on mobility patterns of different migrant groups in Spain. This includes a discussion of the impact of the crisis on what several authors have referred to as ‘lifestyle migrants’. They adopt the definition presented by Benson and O’Reilly (2009a; see also O’Reilly and Benson 2009), attempting to operationalise it in order to undertake analysis of existing statistical data drawn from the Municipal Registers (*Padrón Muncipal*).2 Their analysis concludes that lifestyle migration, as currently conceptualised—in particular its diversity, focussing on a range of variables (for example, diversity in age, moving part-time or full-time, temporarily or permanently)—is imprecise, it is difficult to find discrete characteristics through which to measure it, with the result that it is ‘too ambiguous to guide applied quantitative research’ (Huete et al. 2013: 344).

The first thing that this case demonstrates is that statistical measures of migration do not fit well to an inductively developed concept such as lifestyle migration (or vice versa). We argue that this lack of fit is the undoubted consequence of the particular development of lifestyle migration as a concept developed through long-term qualitative and often ethnographic research rather than through the measurement of objective factors through census and survey data (e.g. age, country of origin, ethnicity). Simply, lifestyle migration is not an objective category and therefore numbers of lifestyle migrants cannot be inferred from statistical data.

Although they argue that lifestyle migration cannot be operationalized, Huete et al. (2013) continue, providing a statistical analysis of the return migration of lifestyle migrants from Spain. They stress that the economic crisis is the cause of this, demonstrating that we might therefore rather understand such migrants as economic migrants. To operationalize lifestyle migration here, they adopt nationality as a proxy; in this case, migrants originating in Britain and EU13+4 countries are presented as having lifestyle migration motivations3. It is clear that they similarly confuse context—the coincidence of such return with the economic crisis—for cause. Crucially, the data from the municipal registers that they use to generate their analysis does not have any information on reasons for moving nor on movements back and forth (re-returns and seasonal flows, for example). The survey data that they draw on is therefore limited in that it can tell us that there were larger numbers of Britons returning to the UK from Spain at this time, but it cannot tell us why; it cannot even tell us that their leaving was related to the crisis. Yet, the authors state clearly that given the *coincidence* of higher numbers of returnees at a time of economic crisis, these migrants could be considered labour or economic migrants. Their adoption of lifestyle migrant as a category to be measured, using country of origin as a proxy for lifestyle migration and imputing context—the crisis—as cause, results in an unconvincing argument.

In general, statistical measures of migration do not fit well with inductively developed concepts. This case demonstrates the importance of understanding what work concepts are doing and how they can usefully be engaged within research and how, in the absence of such understanding, concepts may be (mis)used and misunderstood within research, as we go on to discuss.

**3. Problematizing categories and labels (in migration research)**

The reported case illustrates that in any academic work it is important to think carefully about how categories, labels or conceptual frameworks are being used, by whom, and for what purposes. To take the field of migration studies as a case in point, there is a plethora of different terms for delineating migration flows or types. These come with their own intellectual baggage, reflecting the authors’ disciplinary backgrounds, methodological specialisms, and theoretical approaches (O’Reilly 2012).

Some concepts directly reflect, or draw from ambiguous interpretations of, policy or legal definitions, such as refugees and asylum seekers, displaced persons, and other forced migrants (e.g. Castles 2003; Marfleet 2006). Such concepts are often operationalized in quantitative research on migration, where visa categories—themselves indicators of such policy and legal definitions—standing as proxies for these concepts. Other attempts might describe the direction of a migration flow, such as in the case of counterurbanisation (e.g. Mitchell 2004) and north-south migration (e.g. van der Geest 2011). Many scholars use nationality as a description for the type of migration they are referring to, as in the case of Mexican migration (e.g. Hellman 2008). The terms labour migration and economic migration often impute motivations to particular trends. As in the case of lifestyle migration, these are imprecise terms that attempt to loosely capture the sense that some migrants move in search of work (or are drawn by the demand for labour), and/or that their migration is driven overwhelmingly by economic demands. Nevertheless, these terms are used as concepts extensively and meaningfully in migration literature.

Descriptive terms for migration thus capture one aspect or a feature of the migration (or the motivation(s) behind it)—rather than attempting to construct a discrete category—and are intended as analytical tools. Retirement migration, for example, is a useful concept for thinking about retirement as a feature of some migration flows. The purpose of writing about retirement migration, on the part of such authors as King et al. (2000) and Oliver (2008), was arguably an attempt to draw attention to specific age and end-of-work related aspects of migration that had previously been overlooked in migration studies. Nevertheless, most authors in the field acknowledge the difficulties in actually identifying a delimitable group of actual retirement migrants (Hardill et al. 2005; Gustafson 2001).

As we have already outlined above, intended as an analytical tool, lifestyle migration is difficult to operationalise as a category. This is not a problem specific to that term, it is a general issue for migration studies: mobility flows are notoriously difficult to measure and map, mainly because of their fluidity, and the difficulties of categorizing, measuring and finding adequate statistics. Huete et al. (2013) are right to draw attention to the imprecision in labels and categories used in migration studies; labels, categorizations and conceptual frameworks are rarely mutually exclusive. For example, few would suggest that a labour or economic migrant could not also be of retirement age (or retire having migrated), be migrating from North to South, or be in search of a better quality of life. To refer back to the example of lifestyle migration, and Huete et al.’s (2013) insistence on the economic motivations inspiring return migration, we restate, following Knowles and Harper (2009), that lifestyle is not necessarily prioritised to the exclusion of economic considerations—whether these be possessing the assets and resources to migrate in the first place and/or to lead a fulfilling way of life following migration (see also Hayes 2014).

What this illustrates is that most conceptual labels—especially those developed inductively—cannot easily be turned into categories, and some careful operationalising is required if they are to be used within quantitative work. In work following a more deductive approach, it is crucial that researchers determine what category people go into, that categories do not overlap, but also that they identify variables that would enable them to measure the numbers of people within these categories. Policy labels like ‘refugee’ and national groups (e.g. Mexican migrants) are therefore more easily operationalised for quantitative study, because the variables necessary to measure these—respectively, applications for refugee status, nationality of migrants—are more likely to be found within existing data sets or more easily turned into direct survey questions4.

To return to the example of lifestyle migration, Huete et al. (2013: 331) suggest this needs refining if it is to become a ‘potent intellectual tool’, one for which they have particular applications in mind. However, we contend that Huete et al.’s (2013) critique of lifestyle migration is misplaced; the problems that they identify derive instead from the fact that using the municipal registers, it was never going to be possible to identify lifestyle migrants. Simply, the variables used by the registers cannot be put to work to measure the incidence of lifestyle migration. Examining the dataset reveals that the only variable here that can be used to distinguish migrants is nationality and this is no better a proxy for lifestyle migrant than it is for labour migrant. Herein lies the problem of translating a concept, derived through inductive research processes, into a measureable category.

**4. Lifestyle and migration**

While the concept of lifestyle migration was never intended as a bounded category (Benson and O’Reilly 2009a; Knowles and Harper 2009), there is undoubtedly something to be gained from thinking a little more systematically about what is invoked when the term lifestyle migration is employed, and what it might contribute to migration studies more broadly. Indeed, the early call of Benson and O’Reilly (2009a) to develop and refine the concept has rarely been taken up (Benson and Osbaldiston 2014).

There are three dimensions that we think are worthy of further consideration. First, the political implications of using labels should be considered. Second, Huete et al.’s (2013) consideration of lifestyle migration as a form of economic migration raises important questions that remain to be answered about how to understand economic factors within what has come to be known as lifestyle migration; in particular, we invoke relativity for understanding lifestyle migrant lives. Third, we refer back to the original intentions in establishing the lifestyle migration framework, to understand better the role played by lifestyle in migration; in other words, in what ways is lifestyle meaningful and useful in understanding other forms of migration. We address these in turn below.

**4.1 Political and governance implications**

Given the discussion above, it is clear that all scholars (and policy makers, journalists, survey researchers etc.) must think carefully about what labels and categories they are using in relation to migrants and migrant flows. As Rutter (2006) has argued with reference to ‘forced migration’, choices about labels are often political rather than descriptive. For example, using the language of forced migration draws attention to migrants’ plight and to the inequalities inherent in the global spread of neoliberalism (Marfleet 2006), but the term imputes lack of agency where, in fact, this kind of migration overlaps with other forms in complex ways. This is especially important given that, as Sigona explains, ‘[l]abels not only contribute actively to the definition of collective identities, but, as instruments of a political system, they express and summarize its structure’ (2003: 69). Furthermore, in being operationalised and applied, they can even ‘create the objective of their action’ (ibid.). Employing labels in policy has consequences for how those labelled are treated and governed.

Indeed, Oliver (2011) demonstrates this clearly, noting that categories that incorporate both lifestyle migrants and corporate expatriates rest upon assumptions about economic advantage and financial security, with the result that governance strategies for lifestyle migration are rarely deliberate, emerging instead as ‘side effects’. One example of this is Green’s (2014) discussion of older migrants living in Malaysia. As he explains, describing these people as lifestyle migrants—in particular emphasising freedom of choice and diminishing the relevance of economic factors—may result in a situation where it is easy for governments to overlook or dismiss any needs they may have (ibid.). Among the British in Spain, O’Reilly (2007) documents evidence of marginalised, insecure lives on low incomes, with no long-term provisions for health care or retirement pensions, highlighting the social exclusion of some members of this population. The absence or *ad hoc* development of governance strategies for these populations is problematic, responding to such unanticipated ‘social problems’ rather than undertaking more deliberate governance. These are issues we will explore in future work about the role of governance in lifestyle migration, but the recognition that lifestyle migrants can be vulnerable leads to our next point.

**4.2 Relative affluence and privilege in lifestyle migration**

… economic migrants also engage in projects of the self and indulge in an ongoing search for a better quality of life and lifestyle. Economic concerns and motivations are similarly relevant to the lives of lifestyle migrants (Green 2014: 147).

Despite the concerns we have previously raised over the framing of their argument, Huete et al. helpfully remind us of the economic dimensions that exist in lifestyle migration and the importance of understanding how changing economic circumstances might impact on lifestyle migration, stressing that ‘the dominant approach tends to diminish the actual importance of economic factors in lifestyle migration’ (2013: 337). A notable exception to this can be found in Hayes’ (2014) discussion of geographic arbitrage as a way of understanding lifestyle migration, which he explains as the strategic deployment of economic capitals and resources accumulated in one place to facilitate life(style) in another. In the case he studies, of US citizens moving to Ecuador, the migrants are choosing their destination because they are *not* absolutely wealthy and because they have serious reservations about the quality of life they can afford ‘at home’, especially as older people. It is timely to consider in more detail how economic factors intersect with lifestyle in migration.

In part, the changing conditions and contexts that current crises represents draw attention to the importance of thinking about lifestyle migrants as *relatively affluent and privileged* (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Knowles and Harper 2009), as located within wider (global and local) relations of social and spatial inequality. It is not necessarily the case that such migrants are particularly wealthy or privileged in the countries that they leave, or what we could consider as absolutely wealthy. It is rather the case that they can mobilise capitals, assets and resources in ways that make their aspirations for a better way of life possible within the destination (see for example the work of Korpela (2010), on Westerners in Varanasi and Goa, India). In other words, the capitals that they possess have an enhanced currency when they move. Relative dimensions thus draw attention to the fact that what enables the migration, structurally, is the position the migrants hold historically in global and historical relations of power, shaped by colonialism, tourism development and other major shifts. This moves beyond the mere recognition of the contemporaneous structures that enable migration, into the importance of recognising the systemic privilege and inequalities that underpin lifestyle migration, and are reproduced and resisted through these phenomena (Benson 2013).

The recognition of relativity also allows for an understanding of lifestyle migrants as potentially vulnerable and in some cases, disadvantaged (Green 2044; Hardill et al. 2005; Oliver 2008). Focussing on Thailand, Botterill (forthcoming) stresses the concomitant precarity and privilege of retired lifestyle migrants in Thailand that resulting in their ‘discordant status’, constrained by ‘access to basic economic, political and social rights’ (p. 1). There are some lifestyle migrant populations that might be particularly susceptible to such discordant experiences; the examples above clearly highlight the difficulties that ageing populations have (see O’Reilly and Benson 2015), but it might also be those with lower levels of social, cultural and economic capital are prone to such vulnerabilities. Without a doubt there is a case for further examination of the more desperate cases associated with lifestyle migration—those who wish to take advantage of some of the privileges associated with structural advantage, such as retirement and second-home visas, but whose relative wealth is much smaller and who have less of other relevant capitals.

What is clear is that relative privilege may co-exist with precarity and vulnerability in ways that *absolute* understandings of wealth, privilege and affluence might render invisible. The examples above are an important reminder that we should be careful about assuming that migrants who move from more to less developed countries give no cause for policy-relevant concern.

**4.3 Lifestyle as practice**

As O’Reilly (2012, 2014) has discussed, there has been something of a paradigm shift in social sciences in recent years towards understanding social life as the outcome of the ongoing interaction of structure and agency. Drawing either overtly or implicitly on different versions of what has become known as practice theory, contemporary researchers increasingly aspire to develop concepts to help them unravel the processes involved in the ongoing constitution of social life. In O’Reilly’s endeavour, drawing especially on Rob Stones’ (2005) ‘strong’ version of structuration theory, this involves viewing structure and agency as epistemologically discrete, for research purposes, but as ontologically co-creating. Using this distinction, lifestyle is to some extent the imagined style of life after migration and as such can be considered as a social structure. Lifestyle thus shapes what people expect through more easily identified social and physical structures such as marketing brochures, services, infrastructure, and environment. Some styles of life are simply more easily imaginable and available in some places than others. Lifestyle, as a set of individual or shared ideas and conceptualisations, can come to have a life of its own as social imaginaries (see Castoriadis 1998; Benson 2012; Salazar 2014). Here, places come to have shared meanings mediated through language, symbols and other significations. Lifestyle incorporates many aspects. Lifestyle migrants do not all seek the same lifestyle. The original edited collection *Lifestyle Migration* (Benson and O’Reilly 2009b) identified a search for: a more simple way of life with a slower pace (Benson 2009), spirituality (Korpela 2009), a local community ethos (Casado-Díaz 2009), a more fulfilling working life (Hoey 2009). Griffiths and Maile (2014) have more recently drawn our attention to the city-inspired imaginaries that draw young people to places like Berlin.

These meanings and imaginings, importantly, have the power to shape reality because people act on them, not only by migrating but in the ways they live after migration. Understanding motivations and meanings of migration provides ‘insights into the lives the migrants envisage leading following migration’ (O’Reilly and Benson 2009: 7) and in the lives they try to live. Their desires are witnessed in their practices, in what they do, as much as in their descriptions. Caroline Oliver (2007), for example, has shown how older people living in Spain make friends quickly and easily, take up new hobbies, and try to live a relaxed life in order to achieve their aspirations. Mari Korpela (2014) shows how Westerners in Varanasi and Goa ‘act out’ what they see as the authentic India, by learning and playing musical instruments and following a spiritual path. The style of life post-migration is therefore performed and will, in turn, shape the destination and help form the social imaginings of new (or return) migrants.

**4.4 The role of lifestyle in migration**

Finally, the discussion above has led us to consider more broadly the role of lifestyle *in* migration. What roles does lifestyle play and why is it relevant to consider it as a feature of migration if not as an all-encompassing or exclusive category? A criticism often directed at the concept of lifestyle migration is that, since most migrants are seeking to improve their quality of life, the concept offers nothing new. The fact that many migrants seek a better way of life is an interesting one and does not undermine our concept any more than the fact that retirement migrants may look for work undermines the usefulness of thinking about migration and retirement/older age together.

Lifestyle migration scholars emphasise, as discussed above, the relative importance of lifestyle issues in the motivation to move: these are people who are (relatively) privileged enough to be able to put lifestyle issues ahead of other considerations. In this rendering, the concept may be of value in understanding migration trends not ordinarily considered as lifestyle migration. One example of this is Bolognani’s (2014) account of first and second generation British Pakistanis and the consideration of ‘return’. As she eloquently highlights, among these are narratives of choice that, whether they focus on continued settlement in Britain or return, can be understood as lifestyle reasoning. This, as she presents it, is a significant departure from earlier foci on economic and political rationalisations, providing a layer of nuance to understanding both return and continued settlement. This makes clear that other studies may find it useful to think about the lifestyle elements of migration, or the usefulness of various analytical tools (including lifestyle migration) to understand the complex reasoning and experiences of migrants.

Lifestyle plays a role in much migration in terms of the style of life a migrant imagines can be lived in the new destination, which in turn partly shapes the way of life actually lived after migration. Migrants are often (though of course not always) active agents in their migration, and prior to migration they are likely to project into the future ideas about where they are going and to imagine themselves living there. These imaginings will be more or less accurate, well or ill-informed, and shaped by social constructions (and social imaginaries) of space and place (Benson 2012; Salazar 2014; Griffiths and Maile 2014; O’Reilly 2014). As Huete et al. (2013) suggest, Polish and British migrants in Spain may have a lot in common – both believing the move will improve their quality of life. Knowles and Harper (2009: 11) also argue that:

Elements of settlement practices constituting lifestyle migration are evident in the mobilities of exotic Thai dancers, Filipino maids, and Nepalese and Indian waiters. This is not a sealed category but an open matrix. But among these groups, key elements of lifestyle migration are constrained by the ways in which they are administered by immigration authorities.

To illustrate further the value of examining the role of lifestyle in migration, we examine three distinct empirical examples: the work of Torben Krings and colleagues (2013) on Polish migrants in Ireland; Ines Kohl’s (2013) ethnographic research among the Nigerian Tuareg, a pastoral nomadic group; and Nicole Constable’s research on foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong (2014). The purpose in selecting these three quite different migration phenomena is precisely to illustrate the breadth to which the concept of lifestyle can be employed to understand the meanings that migrants ascribe to their migrations, capturing how this intersects with a range of other motivations and meanings. In this way, we demonstrate the value of understanding the various ways in which lifestyle can be put to work in understanding migration.

Krings et al. have undertaken qualitative panel studies with Polish migrants in Ireland5. They reveal that among the more educated and younger migrants, despite the tendency to see them as economic or labour migrants, there was often as much motivation to move in response to broader aspirations for lifestyle and self-development as for work (Krings et al. 2013). These European ‘free movers’ are increasingly able to create flexible work-life pathways, taking advantage first of all of Ireland’s strong economic position, and more latterly, responding creatively to both economic downturn and European enlargement. They find opportunities for casual and temporary work through friends and contacts, and often start in low-paid, low-skilled work, but can progress to jobs more suited to their qualifications over time. Importantly, however, the migration was also seen as an opportunity for fulfilment, exciting experiences, travel, broadening of horizons, self-realisation and personal development. Locating their career and economic situations within these personal ambitions enables a more nuanced understanding of their agency and choice, migration understood as an ongoing negotiation of economic demands and lifestyle aspirations.

Kohl’s (2013) ethnographic research with the Nigerian Tuareg recounts how the nature of this group’s—a predominantly pastoral nomadic society living in the Sahara and its Sahelian fringes—nomadism has altered drastically in the context of global and local power shifts, with the effects of climate change, and light of their marginality reinforced through wider nation-building processes in the region. The migration of some Nigerian Tuareg, the *ishumar* (a generation of boroder-crossers), is now increasingly cyclical, seasonal, and irregular, a significant change from their traditional pastoral or travel mobilities. They no longer move with their livestock, working instead as seasonal workers, or crossing borders for casual work, informal trade and smuggling. Kohl suggests their nomadism now can be viewed as a form of vagabondage; these migrants are forced to move as a result of political and economic circumstances rather than mobility playing a central part in their freely chosen lifestyles. However, the situation is more complex. To an extent they do choose this lifestyle: their stories are as well understood as embodying a philosophy of movement, as stories of individual desires, and in moving they come to be seen as a new elite, the powerful with knowledge, connections and goods to be envied as they drift between their transnational families. This is partly because, for the *ishumar*, mobility is not uprootedness but normality. Understanding the role of lifestyle (as a way of living) and its relationship to mobility in their lives is crucial.

Finally, we turn to Constable’s (2014) long-term ethnographic study of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. She complicates the image held of these populations by NGOs and charity workers, who expect that migrant women who have children in Hong Kong to want to go home. But in fact what these intermediaries view as exploitative conditions holds all sorts of lifestyle promises for migrants:

It is widely experienced by most foreign domestic workers as a desirable location that is wealthy, beautiful, modern, cosmopolitan, and clean, and it is a place where migrant workers can potentially earn more money than they would at home. If all goes well, in Hong Kong they can take on new and modern identities as wage earners, consumers, and investors in their families’ futures. It is a place where women experience new freedom and independence, new gendered and sexual roles away from the surveillance they would experience at home. However, if all does not go well, for a variety of reasons, the situation is very different (2014: 230).

**5. Conclusion**

While lifestyle migration has its roots in discussions about the relatively affluent, in particular those moving to countries where their quality of life will be improved partly because of a lower cost of living (Hayes 2014), understanding the role of lifestyle in migration makes a broader contribution to migration research. In our work, including this article, we have always made clear that the majority of migrants seek a better way of life through their migration. We hope this paper first step in initiating a conversation that encourages people to think about the role of lifestyle in migration more generally, and the opportunities and structures that support and hinder this (e.g. the social imaginary, visa categories). At present lifestyle migration’s uptake to explain particular types of migration is because among these populations, the interplay of migration, consumption and identity is the predominant and self-evident story. In other migration trends the pursuit of lifestyle co-exists with a range of other complex motivations that it make it difficult to disentangle. However, as the examples presented in the preceding section demonstrate, recognising the role of lifestyle within these adds further nuance to how we think about migration. In particular, lifestyle as a concept offers a ways of introducing both choice and consumption into discussions about migration, complicating the image of the migrant. Understanding the long-term outcomes of migration, and how to ameliorate the difficulties if all does not go well, is enhanced if we understand the role lifestyle plays. Migrants often seek a better and different way of life not easily reduced to economic enhancement. Nigerian *ishumar* are seen to gain prestige from migration (Kohl 2013), Polish in Ireland seek excitement and experience (Krings et al. 2013), and Filipina domestic workers are attracted by the possibility for a new kind of freedom and independence (Constable 2014). British migrating to Spain sought a better way of life in terms of tranquillity, peace, and slowness (O’Reilly 2000). This depended to an extent on their relative affluence (they could afford a better standard of living than in their home country). So if the economic situation has changed it seems obvious some of them would return where they can, once again, in pursuit of ways of improving their quality of life. It is the concept of lifestyle that enables us to understand the process of return a little more.

Understanding the role of lifestyle and its relationship to mobility in migrants’ lives is crucial, be it in terms of imaginations, aspirations, ways of living, or a combination of these as the ongoing processes of migration unravel. Whether a driver of migration, shaping post-migration lives, and to the impacts of migration in the longer term may be a significant feature in understanding the complexity of contemporary migrations and migrant lives, enabling a richer understanding of processes that often reduced to politics and economics. There is a need, however, to be weary of assuming lifestyle within migration; once again, this should be a deductive assumption, but needs to be drawn out inductively from research.

**Notes**

1. This empirical work has often been published as full-length monographs: Benson 2011, Hoey 2014, Knowles and Harper 2009, O’Reilly 2000.

2. Administrative registers of inhabitants administered across Spain by town councils

3. British and EU13+4 residents in Spain are treated as two separate categories in the research because ‘British residents outnumber the residents from EU13+4’ (Huete et al. 2013: 338)

4. Of course, it must be acknowledged there are difficulties with even these labels see O’Neill and Spybey (2003) and Portes and Rumbaut (2006)

5. A 24-month study with 22 migrants starting in 2008.

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