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Rethinking lifestyle and middle-class migration in "left behind" regions

Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins[1] | Rhys Dafydd Jones[2]

[1]Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK

[2]Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, UK

Correspondence
Rhys Dafydd Jones, Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Wales SY23 3DB, UK.
Email: rhj@aber.ac.uk

Abstract

So-called "left behind" regions have gained infamy for working-class discontent. Yet a concurrent phenomenon has gone unremarked: middle-class lifestyles in peripheral places. This article examines how middle-class migrants (defined by economic, social, and cultural capital) to peripheral regions envisage and enact their aspirations. Against presumed migration trajectories to growing urban centres or for better-paid employment, we argue that seeming moves down the "escalator" reveal how inequalities between regions offer some migrants opportunities to enact middle-class lifestyles affordably. We present a qualitative case study of West Wales and the Valleys, predominantly rural and post-industrial and statistically among Europe's most deprived regions. Drawing from interviews with EU and UK in-migrants alongside long-term residents, we illustrate how three dimensions of quality of life—material, relational, subjective—are mobilised in middle-class placemaking amidst peripherality. We demonstrate how spatial inequalities and career trade-offs offer affordable material access to lifestyle and how middle-class aspirations enable migrants to subjectively transform peripherality into enchantment.

KEYWORDS
affordability, left behind regions, lifestyle, migration, spatial inequalities, Wales

1 | INTRODUCTION

So-called "left behind" regions have lately gained infamy as sites of working-class discontent (e.g., Görmar et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Sykes, 2018). Yet another phenomenon has gone largely unremarked: middle-class lifestyles in peripheral places. Research and policy alike often picture migration as if an escalator (Fielding, 1992) logically—perhaps even inevitably—carries people to economically successful urban centres, or regions rich with employment opportunities (Ahlin et al., 2018; Gordon et al., 2015). Despite recent attention to "less-popular" rural areas (Bijker et al., 2012, 2013; Bijker & Haartsen, 2012), emphasising alternatives to the "classic counter-urbanisation" narrative (Stockdale, 2016), the stories behind migrant

trajectories that appear on the surface as a socio-economic "downgrade" are still rarely told and less often interrogated for what they can reveal about the nexus of class, inequalities, and "the good life."

Dominant narratives of where people move to and why have been questioned by work on counter-urbanisation (e.g., Halfacree, 2008, 2014), lifestyle migration (e.g., Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Benson & Osbaldiston, 2016), and "new" immigration destinations for international migrants (e.g., McAreavey, 2017; Winders, 2018). The lifestyle migration literature has particularly called attention to non-economic reasons to move, as has counter-urbanisation researchers' engagement with the "rural idyll" (Halfacree, 2014). Here, middle-class mobility becomes both performed (e.g., Benson, 2012; Heley, 2010) and materialised (e.g., Hoey, 2016; Smith &

Phillips, 2001). These studies, however, have tended to focus on desirable destinations, leaving the spatial inequalities behind (and facilitating) these movements largely unaddressed beyond the acknowledgement that migrant lifestyles are funded by incomes earned elsewhere. By contrast, emerging research on "new" immigration destinations[1] has considered "often unlikely places ... [and] unfamiliar geographies of movement" (McAreavey, 2017, p. 28; see also Bijker et al., 2012, 2013), emphasising "less-popular" destinations, but not yet contended with the lifestyles enabled by migration there. What happens when lifestyle migration meets the places left behind?

In this article, we examine how middle-class migrants—defined in terms of economic, cultural, and social capital—to economically peripheral regions envisage and enact their lifestyle aspirations. Our analysis proceeds through a qualitative case study of West Wales and the Valleys: a NUTS2 region classed as "less developed" (GDP per capita below 75% of EU average) and primarily composed of rural and post-industrial geographies historically associated with out-migration. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with in-migrants from elsewhere in the United Kingdom and from the EU, we illustrate how three dimensions of quality of life—material, relational, and subjective—are mobilised in middle-class migrants' aspirations and equally pursued against and enabled by spatial inequalities. We demonstrate: first, how spatial inequalities can offer those whose class position is less secure the ability to afford aspirational lifestyles; second, how middle-class migrants intentionally pass over career opportunities in favour of material affordability; and, third, how a "middle-class gaze" enables migrants to identify aspects of the region that they can transform into cultural capital, despite—and sometimes due to—its economic peripherality. We further note that many long-term residents (who may also have earlier migrated to the region) also perceive quality of life positively, providing an impetus to stay (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018) in contrast to accounts that emphasise structural factors (Stockdale & Ferguson, 2020) and attachments (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018).

The article begins with a literature review on migration and quality of life, in which we locate our contribution, while offering a more complex picture of middle-class mobility. The following section outlines the methodological underpinnings of our research, detailing our case study region and our participants. Empirical discussion occupies the substantive sections of the article, beginning with an examination of middle-class migrants' material quality of life and how migrants (at least retrospectively) construct their choice to move. Subjective factors, including perceptions of non-metropolitan space, are the focus of our next empirical section. We then illustrate the complex connection between lifestyle and migration, arguing instead for "lifestyle staying," wherein the region becomes subjectively reconfigured following the move. Finally, and conversely, we reflect on in-migrants, whose quality of life had *not* developed as they wished. We conclude with some reflections on the implications for policy and academic debates on lifestyle and migration. As we reflect, spatial inequalities may open up lifestyle opportunities—but the complexities of real lives intervene.

2 | MIGRATION, LIFESTYLE, AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Classic analyses of the reasons for migration have focused on objective determinants such as wage differentials between sending and receiving areas. Yet individuals do not choose to move due to socio-economic indicators or abstract spatial concepts—*perceptions* of different places, and how these matter to individual lives and lifestyles, prove more meaningful (de Haas, 2011). The literature on lifestyle migration (Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014a) has illustrated this in a range of international settings including southern France (Benson, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Hoggart & Buller, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c), Aotearoa/New Zealand (Fountain & Hall, 2002), Panama (Benson, 2013c, 2014), Spain (Huber & O'Reilly, 2004; Oliver & O'Reilly, 2010; O'Reilly, 2000, 2003, 2007), and India (Korpela, 2014). Research has echoed the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006), emphasising mobility as both the privileged capacity to move, and the experiences therein. Attention is also placed on experiences after migration, such as whether expectation meets reality (Salazar, 2014; Vannini & Taggart, 2014), and further moves, including return migration (Farrell et al., 2012).

Much lifestyle migration research has examined aspirations and motivations for migration, largely concerning the subjective pursuit of "the good life." Many studies illustrate desires to "follow dreams" through "'stepping out' rather than ... 'dropping out' from the 'rat race'" (Smith & Phillips, 2001, p. 465). This may involve considerable changes in lifestyle, like opening a guesthouse or renovating a farmhouse (Benson, 2013a, 2013b; Hoggart & Buller, 1995a, 1995c), echoing similar studies on rural counter-cultural lifestyles (Griffiths & Maile, 2014; Jones, 1993, 1997; Korpela, 2014; Vannini & Taggart, 2014). However, the focus on aspiration risks privileging lifestyle change as a *cause* of migration, rather than potentially arising *from* it. Salazar (2014, p. 133), for example, illustrates how lifestyle may be more contingent, recounting experiences of émigrés who "stumbled upon their (imagined) 'paradise', rather than carefully choosing it." Furthermore, pursuing particular lifestyles may not necessarily motivate migration. As Halfacree (2014) and O'Reilly (2014) note, "watershed" or lifecourse events can trigger migration and thence self-reinterpretation. For example, retirees may relocate to free capital (O'Reilly, 2000), return to areas associated with childhood (Farrell et al., 2012), or be near friends and family. Similarly, moving to study or take up a new job can lead to lifestyle changes. Rather than reducing lifestyle to a cause for migration, we need to examine the complexities of lifestyle changes that *arise* from migrating.

We explore the complexities of lifestyle and migration through three dimensions of quality of life that migrants individually and comparatively perceive: the *material*, the *relational*, and the *subjective* (McGregor, 2007; White, 2008). The material dimension includes factors such as income, employment, and housing. The relational dimension concerns the personal and social relationships that people share. The subjective, finally, is a domain of values, perceptions, and experiences. Together, these inter-related dimensions reflect what a person *materially* has, how they are *relationally* connected, and how they

subjectively evaluate their experience. While these dimensions attend to economic factors, they equally move beyond a "work" or "lifestyle" dichotomy, integrating individuals' own perceptions of what they consider to be the relevant impacts of migration on their own lives (White, 2008; Wright, 2012). Using this framework hence helps us nuance the relationship between migration and spatial inequalities, to which we now turn.

3 | MIGRATION AND "LESS-POPULAR" REGIONS

The material, relational, and subjective dimensions of quality of life necessarily occur in interaction with the places where lives are lived (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2012). Lifestyle migration literature heavily features rural regions (Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014b), where motivations for migrating include closeness to nature (Smith & Phillips, 2001), self-sufficiency (Vannini & Taggart, 2014), and, less benignly, "white flight" (Neal & Agyeman, 2006). Partly due to the consumption of lifestyle magazines and property programmes (Benson, 2012; O'Reilly, 2014), certain rural areas are perceived as offering more "authentic" lifestyle experiences, like southern France (Benson, 2013a, 2013b), or Australia's eastern coast (Osbaldiston, 2014). Some such areas are—or historically have been—relatively deprived (e.g., Botterill, 2017). Indeed, productivist agriculture, urbanisation, and de-industrialisation have often created a vacant housing supply. Yet these structural forces equally exist where lifestyle migration has not been so vogue.

Despite the rural focus, lifestyle migration also exists in cities—gentrification, studentification, and suburbanisation involve framing destinations around lifestyle aspirations (Chatterton, 1999). There are fewer accounts of moving to a city itself—as opposed to certain parts of it—for lifestyle reasons. Notable exceptions are Boyle's (2006) account of Dublin, perceived as more vibrant (yet laid back) and dynamic (yet friendly), and Griffiths and Maile (2014) on Berlin, perceived as allowing freedom and creativity in contrast to more conservative cities. However, Dublin and Berlin are world cities and popular tourist destinations. Not all cities are so recognised; reputation, deindustrialisation, and de-population render other cities less attractive. Yet these are still home for many people, and people continue to move to them, even if in smaller numbers.

Emerging research on migration to "less-popular" regions has highlighted three alternative motivations to "classical" accounts of lifestyle-led counterurbanisation (Bijker et al., 2012, 2013; Bijker & Haartsen, 2012). First, migrants to less-popular regions are more likely to be motivated by relational factors tied in with lifecourse events, such as moving closer to family and friends or relocating for a partner. Second, previous residence or visits, sometimes overlapping with return migration, extend these relational connections. Third, migrants to less-popular regions are often materially motivated by comparatively lower house prices, including as an affordable alternative to more desirable destinations (Stockdale, 2014). This may also be connected to subjective dimensions, such as perceptions of space,

privacy, or comfortable housing styles (Bijker et al., 2013, p. 450). "Unfashionable" areas may be more affordable but are not (yet) deemed a marker of lifestyle "success"—although cultural capital can be accrued through being a "pioneer" (Smith, 1996). However, little attention has yet been given to the experiences of migrants to less-popular regions after migration—the material, relational, and subjective dimensions of quality of life have the potential to be revealing here.

4 | CLASS AND MIGRATION

Literature on lifestyle migration has noted economic inequalities: British migration to southern France, for example, is enabled by migrants' relative affluence compared to low local incomes (Benson, 2014, pp. 47, 49), but also by the unaffordability of the British countryside (Buller & Hoggart, 1994). Inequalities between neighbourhoods or localities similarly underpin gentrification through the "rent gap" (Smith, 1996). Counterurbanisation particularly depends on material inequalities between urban and rural spaces. The "new squirearchy" (Heley, 2010), for example, involves upper-middle class people buying the large country mansions formerly owned by landed gentry and performing rural elite status. Yet, while lifestyle mobility requires financial capital to cover moving costs and property, affluence here is "*relative* rather than absolute" (Benson, 2014, p. 48, her emphasis). Price *differentials*, not prices per se, facilitate lifestyle migration (Bijker et al., 2012, 2013; Bijker & Haartsen, 2012). The service class commonly features in counterurbanisation studies (Spencer, 1995). "Professional" roles (e.g., teachers, medics, and solicitors) can be undertaken anywhere and offer relatively high incomes compared with the average pay in some localities.

Of course, there is more to class than income and financial capital. Recent studies have examined cultural and social capital in lifestyle migration through privilege (Benson, 2014). Mobility itself can be a privilege (Adey, 2006; Osbaldiston, 2014, p. 182). Social ties, linguistic skills, qualifications, and professional work similarly represent cultural capital accumulations. Relocation can itself create cultural capital, linking spatial and social mobility (Scott, 2019). For example, "greentrifiers" (Smith & Phillips, 2001) seeking more sustainable lifestyles demonstrate success through relocating to a desirable rural area and by exhibiting "green" attitudes. This further reflects socio-spatial experiences of inequality that involve relational and subjective comparisons to others.

While bundles of capital are important in lifestyle migration, the middle class should not be reified as a homogenous category and middle-class migration is diverse (Scott, 2019). Financial, cultural, and social capital intertwine; one alone may be neither necessary nor sufficient to be middle class. Financial capital, for example, mingles with the lifecourse in different ways and stages, from financial independence in early adulthood to unencumbered retirement (Hoggart & Buller, 1995c; Huber & O'Reilly, 2004). Those who have a wealthy upbringing have different experiences to those who become middle class during their own lifetimes, while generational differences

influence housing and employment patterns. Hence, "both economic and sociocultural factors ... come into play in the locational decision-making of the middle classes and ... come into play differently for different individuals" (Scott, 2019, p. 1741). How do bundles of capital combine with spatial inequalities to enable middle-class lifestyles in "less-popular" regions? How do the material, relational, and subjective dimensions of quality of life intervene in decision-making and emerge after migration?

5 | INTRODUCING WEST WALES AND THE VALLEYS

Wales is a constituent country of the United Kingdom, with a population of approximately 3 million (StatsWales, 2019), and a distinctive linguistic and cultural heritage. Predominantly rural, with a historically agricultural and industrial economy, Wales has struggled through rural decline and de-industrialisation and has an economic geography offering "the least opportunity to benefit from 'economic' mass of any UK country or region" (Price, 2016, p. 42). Executive devolution[2] in 1999 promised Welsh governance for "Welsh problems" (House of Commons, 1997). Wales has since received high levels of EU regional development funding—in the 2014–2020 EU programming period, Wales received 20% of the United Kingdom's total structural funds allocation (Woolford & Hunt, 2016) for scarcely 5% of the population.

At NUTS2 level, Wales splits between "more developed" (GDP per capita > 90% EU average) East Wales, encompassing capital city Cardiff and the English border, and "less developed" (GDP per capita < 75% EU average) West Wales and the Valleys (Figure 1), one of just two UK regions to be net beneficiaries from EU funding (Ifan et al., 2016) before Brexit. West Wales and the Valleys is our case study focus. As a peripheral region in European terms, within a relatively poor country (albeit with considerable resources), within a rich state (albeit with significant inequalities), West Wales and the Valleys exemplifies the spatial inequalities that contribute to some regions becoming "left behind" or "less-popular." Of course, the region itself is socio-economically diverse, and we use "less-popular" language as a heuristic to investigate underexamined middle class migration patterns. To reflect internal differences, we selected two comparative areas within the region (Figure 2): Ceredigion, a rural county on the western coast, and Swansea, a post-industrial city on the southern coast.

Ceredigion has an embedded agricultural economy, primarily livestock, with small-scale fisheries along the coast. The largest town has fewer than 20,000 residents, and there is no city within commuting distance. A regional hospital and educational, cultural, and government institutions offer professional employment, but local retail has shrunk 15% over the past decade (AECOM, 2018). Demographically, Ceredigion is "greying," with the 16–24 cohort buoyed by two small universities.

Swansea is Wales' second largest city. Once dubbed "Copperopolis," the now post-industrial port city is flanked by
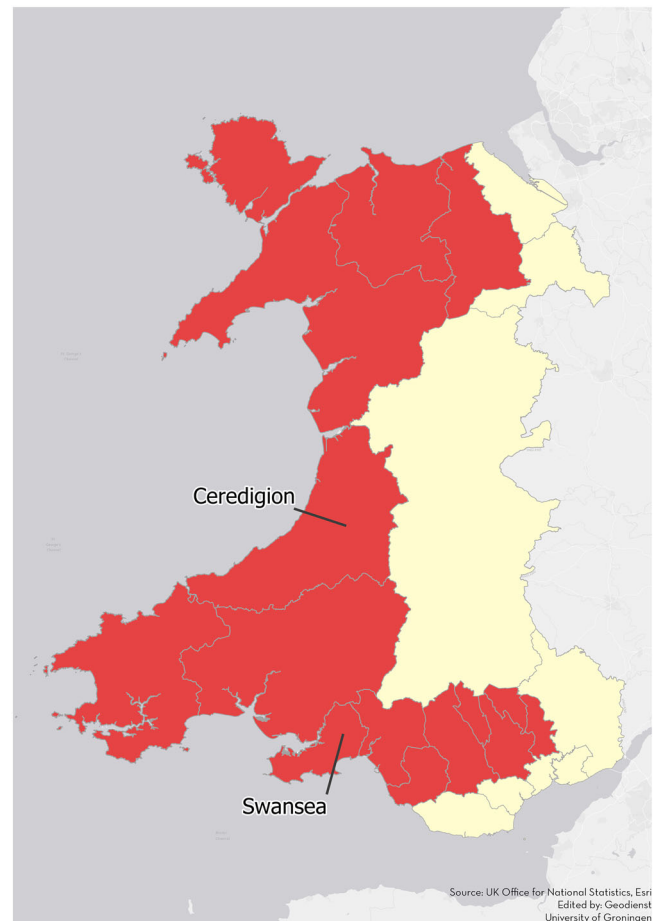

FIGURE 1 West Wales and the Valleys

struggling former mining communities and protected natural landscapes—Welsh poet Dylan Thomas called Swansea an "ugly, lovely town." Despite lying 90 km from Cardiff, Swansea has not shared the capital's recent economic growth. Regeneration hopes rest on a new "city deal" investment programme, while Swansea University attracts some 20,000 students.

Table 1 provides a statistical profile of both areas within our case region.

6 | METHODOLOGY

Our research was undertaken as the Welsh case study for the Horizon 2020 IMAJINE project's comparative investigation into spatial effects and subjective determinants of migration. Following the project methodology—which linked migration flows between multiple case regions—we drew participants from two selected EU migrant groups (Germans and Romanians), alongside internal migrants from within the United Kingdom, and long-term residents within our case region.

Migration from both Germany and Romania is notable in the United Kingdom (OECD, 2018). In Wales, 2011 census data location quotients show clustering of German-born and German passport-

holding residents in Ceredigion; we hence recruited German participants there. Most German respondents were women, reflecting German migration patterns to the region, according to respondents. Most came from fairly prosperous rural areas or large city regions and had (or were studying towards) a tertiary qualification. Respondents typically had previous migration experiences, particularly studying abroad. One respondent was born in East Germany and a child at reunification.

Romanian migration has increased exponentially since work restrictions were lifted in 2014; in 2016, Romanians accounted for 24.7% of total EU/EFTA mobility to the United Kingdom (Eurostat, 2018). While available census data predates lifted restrictions, there was already a critical mass of Romanian-born residents in Swansea by 2011, which can reasonably be assumed to have grown. Consequently, we recruited Romanian participants in Swansea. Again, most respondents were women, but not representative of broader Romanian migration to the United Kingdom. All but two had migrated before 2014, and only one worked in an industry (hospitality) where post-2004 EU migrants are substantial parts of the workforce. Most had a tertiary qualification. Two had migrated elsewhere in the United Kingdom before moving to Swansea; two migrated to marry British partners.

We engaged with internal migrants and long-term residents in both Ceredigion and Swansea. For simplicity, we classed long-term residence as 10 years or more and internal migration as within 10 years.[3] Consequently, the internal migrant and long-term cohorts included three EU27 citizens. For the purposes of this article, however, we do not closely differentiate between the internal and international migrant groups.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants from across the four groups: Germans ($n = 13$), Romanians ($n = 8$), internal migrants ($n = 19$), and "stayers" ($n = 19$). We recruited through mobilising regional networks, advertising, and snowballing, following a quota system to control for gender, age, occupation, and (for migrants) residence length. Interviews were held face-to-face, in English or Welsh, recorded with the participant's consent, and later professionally transcribed. Transcripts were analysed using NVivo, following an iteratively determined coding scheme. Having outlined the research design and method, we now turn to these respondents' accounts of moving to and staying in West Wales and the Valleys.

FIGURE 2 Ceredigion and Swansea study areas

TABLE 1 Comparison of key indicators across UK, Wales, West Wales and the Valleys, Ceredigon, and Swansea

	UK	Wales	West Wales and the Valleys	Ceredigion	Swansea
Total population				72,992	240,000[a]
% economically inactive (excluding students)	17.4	19.7	21.4	21.0	20.7
% unemployed	3.9	4.1	4.4	2.8	4.1
% jobseeker's allowance claimants	2.9	3.1	3.2	1.9	3.3
% workless households	14.5	17.2	19.4	18.4	22
£ median gross weekly income	584.9	535.00	418.26	504.40	521.00
% public sector employment	21.5	26.4	28.0	29.7	31.8
% private sector employment	78.2	73.2	71.9	69.9	67.9
% Welsh speaking	Insufficient data	19.0	23.0	47.3	23.8

Note: Most recent data from Stats Wales.
[a]The city proper (the pre-1974 Swansea County Borough) has a population of around 190,000, while the surrounding area that is part of the current City and County of Swansea has a population of around 50,000.

7 | AFFORDING TO MOVE: MATERIAL DIMENSIONS OF MIGRATION

Income and affordability were central to many of our participants' accounts of moving to West Wales and the Valleys. Costs were reckoned comparatively, with housing a common yardstick. For example, an in-migrant to Swansea explained:

> I've got friends that live in Southampton.[4] They came to visit me … they have a tiny two bedroomed terraced house just like mine and they paid 320 grand for it. They just couldn't get over how big my rooms were and how high the ceilings were. They were like, "Wow, it's just so big." I was like, "That's what you get for living in Swansea." It's really nice. It's really cheap. (058, internal migrant, Swansea)

Others spoke similarly of affording to buy a home in the region—typically larger than the small terrace or flat they could purchase in a metropolitan centre. Such responses echo the migration motivations to less-popular regions in the Netherlands (Bijker et al., 2012, 2013; Bijker & Haartsen, 2012) and exemplify how the comparative "cheapness" produced by peripherality could enable and signify middle-class aspirations. This appears to be particularly true of migration to Wales, often appearing as a destination when more expensive areas are unobtainable (Stockdale, 2014).

Lower costs allowed money to be redirected towards lifestyle activities. Recalling that his sibling in London "earned about £50-ish grand a year"—comfortably above the UK median of £585 a week (ONS, 2019)—a young professional in Swansea estimated:

> [T]o get [that salary] in London, I'd need £3,500 a year to get a train ticket … like £900 in rent a month, that's gone … having a car as well as having a train ticket, your lease on that, the petrol … nothing left at the end of it. (035, internal migrant, Swansea)

While London is often constructed as the "top" of the "escalator," and high salaries a marker of success, our interviewees presented an alternative narrative in which trading location and salary made material sense. Lifestyle loomed large in this trade-off. For an in-migrant to Ceredigion:

> In terms of pure finance our earnings are lower. Our outgoings are also lower … but I feel our standard of living is something sort of separate to that, which is that we get to the outdoors and get to not lock our door … We had more money in London, but we've got more soul here. (006, internal migrant, Ceredigion)

Reflecting lifestyle migration and counter-urbanisation tropes, this interviewee projected authenticity (Benson, 2013b, 2014; Smith & Phillips, 2001) through contrasting more "soul" to less cash.

Long-term residents shared similar sentiments. A musician who had lived in Ceredigion since young adulthood (and had visited frequently as a child) reflected:

> I'm on a very small income and a lot of my friends are equally on very small incomes, but I think in an area like this we can survive on a very small income and have a very nice lifestyle. Probably more so than in a city or a more expensive area. I am aware that people are living very close to the breadline and I am myself, but I think that's compensated for by a lovely standard of living and a lovely environment here. (011, long-term, Ceredigion)

Here, the rural environment (to which we return below) extends the material, offsetting lower income (Vannini & Taggart, 2014). Instead of preventing a desirable lifestyle, the lower average income in West Wales and the Valleys becomes balanced beside reduced living costs, and reframed through material affordability.

Hence, moving to West Wales and the Valleys was often posited as a reasoned choice, rather than a short-term step on the "escalator" (Fielding, 1992):

[I]t's a selective process of people who want to work here. There are of course job opportunities, but also looking at other colleagues, often people make a positive choice of coming here and that then affects the climate of work as well. (008, German, Ceredigion)

This sense of migration as a "selective process" and a "positive choice" also suggests consequent emotional and financial investment into the region.

Of course, while respondents praised the lifestyle achieved through lower living costs, middle-class capital still enables this, as a Swansea professional alluded when asked if she would recommend the city to other in-migrants:

[I]f this person is professional then, yes, go for it. You will enjoy lots of opportunities, lots of nice people, better lifestyle, better level of living. If it's someone who is low skilled or looking for [a] low skilled job, … I would probably not suggest Swansea just because it's a bit more difficult to find a good paid job and a role in a company. (034, internal migrant, Swansea)

Here, the economic and cultural capital accompanying a professional role enables a middle-class lifestyle unavailable to those with fewer career options. Indeed, while houses in the region are relatively affordable, they remain *un*affordable for many. Over the last 40 years, campaigning around tourism, second-home ownership, and retirement migration pricing out local residents in rural Wales has led to numerous policy initiatives and, infamously, arson attacks attributed to *Meibion Glyndŵr* ("the sons of [Welsh prince Owain] Glyndŵr"). Privilege (Benson, 2014) is evident—affordability becomes converted into lifestyle benefits through middle-class capital.

Material dimensions are central to affordability. The examples in this section show how mobility can enable a middle-class lifestyle in peripheral regions. Yet, as our discussion has already begun to show, there is more than the material at stake.

8 | CHOOSING PERIPHERAL PLACE: RELATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF STAYING

West Wales and the Valleys is not typically regarded as fashionable: "People only leave, don't they? Some people just stay, and some people just leave." (006, internal migrant, Ceredigion). Structural unemployment and signs of socio-economic struggle characterising many localities, and influencing popular perceptions:

I'm guessing you've seen *Twin Town* … there's a quote in the movie. It says that Swansea is a pretty shitty city. So, whenever you say Swansea to any of my north Wales friends they're like, "pretty shitty city" … it has a bit of a reputation (058, internal migrant, Swansea)

Yet as Bijker and Haartsen (2012, p. 655) note, "familiarity with an area creates more positive representations," suggesting that less-popular areas may have negative associations until people experience them. Previous studies (e.g., Griffiths & Maile, 2014; O'Reilly, 2014) have observed how enchantment with place—whether locality or region/nation—can inform lifestyle and migration aspirations. Despite the disenchanting narratives of decline, many respondents claimed positive affective and relational connections with Swansea, Ceredigion, or Wales. Visiting the region, often as a child, made for lasting impressions:

I used to come on holiday here as a child. My father always used to say it was like coming home and I think he passed that onto me. (013, internal migrant, Ceredigion)

Another Ceredigion in-migrant spoke of their spouse's childhood experiences, which fostered "a connection with the place" (006, internal migrant, Ceredigion) and eventually led the couple to move. While perhaps reflecting idyllic childhood memories, these relational connections are not surprising, since domestic tourism is an important industry for Wales.

These examples also suggest how family connections could prompt moves to the region:

[M]y husband … is Welsh. That's how I ended up in Swansea … We bought our first flat in [England, but] … we were travelling back and forth [to Wales] all the time to see his parents and just to be on the beach, and then as I wasn't working he managed to find a job in Cardiff. So we moved back to Swansea to be closer to his parents.

(040, Romanian, Swansea)

Here, mobility is linked both to family relationships and lifecourses. While such factors can be considered "chain migration" rather than specifically lifestyle-related, being near family can enable quality of life by, for example, mitigating long journeys to visit, or providing care. Like the material affordability discussed above, relational proximity at once enables lifestyle and is an aspect of lifestyle, providing a distinct motivation for moving to less-popular areas (Bijker et al., 2012; Bijker & Haartsen, 2012).

For some respondents, a relationship with the Welsh language, and a desire to move to where Welsh is more widely spoken, was important, particularly at points in the lifecourse such as children starting school. Remote, agricultural, Welsh-speaking western Wales has been particularly seen to embody authentic Welshness (Gruffudd, 1994, 1995; Jones, 1993, 1997). One Welsh speaker, who had lived abroad and elsewhere in the United Kingdom for many years, relocated to Ceredigion to raise her children in a Welsh-speaking environment:

[T]he children they'd be brought up first language [Welsh] because our roots were so important to both of us and [we wanted them] to know where they came from (017, internal migrant, Ceredigion)

Haartsen and Stockdale (2018) note the significance of "children-led" newcomers to the Dutch countryside, whose staying decisions are informed by child-raising considerations. Access to Welsh language education and services are similarly important for parent incomers (although it does not follow that staying will be reconsidered once children reach adulthood). Notably, in-migrants who were not Welsh speakers often also emphasised Welsh language education, particularly in Ceredigion (but less so in Swansea):

I wanted my children to be brought up bilingually. I thought that was an education advantage … I thought it would sensitise small children to minority culture issues. (001, internal migrant, Ceredigion)

Alongside the opportunity to develop a "deeper" connection with people and localities, this respondent frames awareness of Welsh as more broadly relational. Choosing place becomes about fostering relational outlooks.

9 | SLOW SPACE: SUBJECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF MOVING AND STAYING

The perceived slower pace of life was a central component of the subjective quality of life participants enjoyed in West Wales and the Valleys. Although common in predominantly rural areas, this perception also applied to post-industrial Swansea:

Swansea city centre during the day is a great example of the slow pace of life. I had a day off on Friday last week and I went to have a little mooch around the town … to just walk around. It's something which I'd never do before, but now for me … that's how I try and slow myself down, have a day off and just have a coffee, have a walk around the shops … have a relax, go and have a chat. (035, internal migrant, Swansea)

The emphasis here is on adjusting to a different, more enjoyable pace of life compared with London. This experience was shared by a Romanian, who had first lived in London after migrating:

We moved from London because we wanted to get rid of the dirt that London had. The noise. The busyness of London. We wanted to hear the birds in the morning. To be able to enjoy life and at the end of the working day to actually do other things, rather than commute … While I miss listening to an audio book on the tube … I'd rather go home and read the book myself. (037, Romanian, Swansea)

Again, subjective dimensions that make life more enjoyable – cleaner, quieter surroundings; signs of nature; freeing leisure time through a shorter commute – are emphasised (see also Griffiths & Maile, 2014). Through comparison to London, "pretty shitty" Swansea becomes re-constructed as greener, less hurried, and more authentic.

We noted above how Ceredigion's rural landscapes offered a more-than-material compensation for "living very close to the breadline" (011, long-term, Ceredigion). Similar narratives were offered in Swansea, where the coastal landscape presaged leisure:

Being able to be outside for the quality of life wise is really important because I love being outside. I love being in the sea. I love the water. If there's waves, I'm surfing. If it's flat, I'm paddle boarding. I'm just outside all the time. (058, internal migrant, Swansea)

Embodied and encountered through leisure (Cloke & Perkins, 1998), Swansea's proximate landscapes become claimed for lifestyle. However, this is not necessarily a case of the landscape providing the allure for mobility, as we now go on to explore.

10 | INTEGRATING MATERIAL, RELATIONAL AND SUBJECTIVE DIMENSIONS THROUGH "LIFESTYLE STAYING"

Lifestyle aspirations and expectations vary at different stages in the lifecourse. A Romanian migrant in Swansea (040), for example, noted how she had undertaken multiple migrations in her life for different motivations: earlier migration for material education and career opportunities, later migration for relational reasons, such as having children and moving to be closer to her husband's parents, who were becoming older. Lifestyle is here less a migration goal than subjectively perceived while moving for other reasons (Salazar, 2014).

Lifestyle as discovery rather than intention was common among those who initially migrated for education. Study and exchange created positive impressions of West Wales and the Valleys, with Swansea University a particular draw:

I was just looking through the clearing list and Swansea came up … I wanted to be able to live on campus and have everything together, because obviously I was eighteen and I was a bit scared. … When I came down for an Open Day I think I just remembered being, like, "I love it." … "I'm going to Swansea." (058, internal migrant, Swansea)

This respondent refers to "clearing," a process allowing students who have not met the grades required for first-choice study places to re-apply for unfilled places at other universities—Swansea was not her first choice. But, having moved to study, she chose to stay. Other respondents who attended university in the region similarly stayed after graduation; some left and later returned, sometimes to a different part of the region. Over half of the German cohort had attended university in the United Kingdom, either for an entire qualification, or on a short-term exchange:

When I did the British Studies Programme [in Germany] … there was always stuff about Scotland and always about Ireland on the syllabus and English by default. I just thought … what's going on with the fourth nation? … Basically I [came on exchange] out of frustration because I wanted to know something about Wales, and I wasn't getting that in my own institution. (020, German, Ceredigion)

This respondent returned to Germany after the exchange, before relocating to Wales to work, highlighting how "anchoring" (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2018) can lead to staying in an area. This also highlights

differing aspirations and expectations. Echoing Benson and Osbaldiston's (2014b) call to consider what happens *after* migration, we might speak of lifestyle *staying*, rather than lifestyle migration (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018).

While attachments to the material and relational environment influence newcomers to the countryside in choosing to remain (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018), there has been less research focus on the quality of life dimensions that depart from these factors. As we have discussed, lifestyle is not always an explicit driver for migration. Particularly to less-popular areas, migration may (initially) be to study, work, join a partner or family, or release capital. Lifestyle considerations may inform these decisions, entwined with other factors, or be identified after migration (Salazar, 2014). Hence "lifestyle staying," as decisions to stay put (for now) embraces the material trade-offs for a subjectively pleasing lifestyle. However, it would be wrong to reduce staying to lifestyle. In our final section we consider material limits to onward mobility and more subjectively negative attitudes towards the region.

11 | THE OTHER SIDE OF QUALITY OF LIFE: MATERIALLY TRAPPED, SUBJECTIVELY DISAPPOINTED

Although lifestyle staying keeps people in the area, several respondents – particularly young professionals and those living around their former university – anticipated eventually moving on. However, just as the relative affordability of living in the region enabled middle-class lifestyles, "cheapness" could limit respondents' ability to return or relocate to a more affluent area:

[I]f we looked to go back now, we'd be selling our four-bedroom detached here and looking for a two-bedroom semi on a huge estate in that area [of origin], and it's not what we want. In fact, the house that we've left there now would cost £150,000 more than this house [in Ceredigion] because the house prices have gone up so much around there. (013, internal migrant Ceredigion)

By trading the larger house that met their aspirations for a smaller house that did not, this respondent understood moving—even to a more desirable area—to bring a lower quality lifestyle.

Spatial inequalities underpin these different house prices. Average house prices in Wales are among the United Kingdom's lowest (HM Land Registry, 2020), and house prices in some areas of rural Wales have been slow to recover from the 2007–2008 financial crisis. In Ceredigion, where public sector institutions are major employers, austerity politics and higher education marketisation has meant fewer new jobs, and a relatively stagnant housing market. The lower prices and slower growth that produce the region's relative affordability equally translate into the relative *un*affordability of housing elsewhere. Hence, decisions to stay may be informed by the poorer material quality of life that could be achieved elsewhere.

Staying in the region may also limit career opportunities (Boyle, 2006):

I've noticed quite a lot of people receiving degrees … and just moving into basic administrative work. … So often the people who work in a restaurant are overqualified (026, long-term, Ceredigion)

University graduates staying following graduation and becoming "underemployed" results from a combination of structural factors with material outcomes, subjective lifestyle choices, and relational emphasis on connection and stability. While graduates may be lifestyle stayers (for the time being), their curtailed career may materially limit future mobility.

One respondent reflected that, in hindsight, moving to Ceredigion may not have been the best decision:

[I]t was the right choice for me, but I believe that maybe I'm wrong. … I can see that maybe I would have been happier and more fulfilled. … I think [my daughter] might have been happier being brought up in London, and … have appreciated, just as I did, the huge richness and access to everything so easily. (001, internal migrant, Ceredigion)

The temporality of migration decisions entwine with the lifecourse (Stockdale, 2014, 2016; Stockdale & Ferguson, 2020). Deciding to migrate may have been "the right choice" at the time, but subsequent experiences can cast subjective doubt. The respondent's reflections are significant for three reasons. First, children may be disappointed with parents' decisions to migrate to more "remote," "quieter" localities (Vannini & Taggart, 2014). Second, while lifestyle migration consolidated the respondent's own cultural capital, their daughter's exposure to a more limited social field was perceived as potentially producing future disadvantage, demonstrating the complexities of cultural capital. Third, as a counterpoint to Haartsen and Stockdale's (2018) "children-led" stayers, leaving considerations equally involve child-raising considerations.

These examples highlight the limitations in thinking of lifestyle migration as a uniform upward trajectory in quality of life. They further highlight the need to account for complexity in terms of a lifestyle–lifecourse–migration nexus, where material, relational, and subjective "success" may be context-dependent.

12 | CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have outlined the motivations for and experiences of middle-class migration to a relatively peripheral region, West Wales and the Valleys. In doing so, we have emphasised how spatial inequalities produce the region's relative material affordability, and how relational connections and subjectively perceived advantages inform "lifestyle staying." Affordability enables a middle-class lifestyle—in some cases, one that may be unobtainable in more desirable regions—through lower costs of living and buying (larger) property, while shorter commutes free time for leisure. Yet, since affordability emerges from the spatial inequalities resulting from deindustrialisation and rural decline, benefiting from affordability is contingent on relative material privilege.

Despite the salience of middle-class aspiration, lifestyle is not necessarily the driver for migration (Salazar, 2014). While some respondents declared a previous relational "enchantment" with the region, many initially migrated for reasons other than lifestyle. "Lifestyle staying" suggests that motivations *for* migration should be disentangled from experiences *after* migration. Aspirations for "the good life" are subjectively contingent on circumstances that can change during the lifecourse. Crucially, lifestyle may not solely determine staying—factors from the material economics of moving elsewhere to curtailed career experience limit future migration opportunities.

As a predominantly rural region, with a small, post-industrial city, West Wales and the Valleys performs poorly on socio-economic and employment metrics compared with more affluent agglomerative centres. However, this material contrast to metropolitan life, particularly London life, also serves as an attraction: respondents subjectively perceive West Wales and the Valleys as cleaner, less stressful, cheaper, and slower. Because spatial inequalities sustain such subjective distinctions, there are policy-related points to consider. First, affordability has consequences, including the pricing-out of local residents from some communities, concerns for Welsh language vitality, and contestation over (primarily incomer-driven) initiatives like rewilding (Wynne-Jones et al., 2018). Equally, however, projected reductions in EU migrants after Brexit holds implications for local services, including health and education (Welsh Government, 2017), which have benefitted from EU mobility—in turn helping sustain the population. Further, the general decline in exchange programmes and possible end of UK participation in Erasmus, reduces the likelihood of potential future migrants forming relational attachments to Wales. Meanwhile, UK government plans to quantify degree value through graduate earnings have worrying implications for universities in more economically-marginal regions whose graduates stay on to live and work.

The material, relational, and subjective dimensions of quality of life combine to shape shifting lifestyle considerations, before and after migration and across the lifecourse. Echoing points made elsewhere (Salazar, 2014; Vannini & Taggart, 2014), we emphasise the need for more nuanced accounts of lifestyle (in) migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2016) that reflect the variety in "full human lives." These complexities also challenge the dichotomy between escalator accounts of (economic) migration, and the pull of lifestyle. As we have argued, attending to affordability highlights how spatial inequalities can enable lifestyle migration through allowing the performance of middle-class lifestyles where they would not otherwise be possible.

seminar series, for which we thank James Robinson and participants. Most importantly, we are grateful to the participants in our study for their time and sharing their experiences. The usual disclaimers apply.

ENDNOTES

[1] A problematic term, often actually describing racialised migration (El-Enany, 2020), which risks erasing longer histories of mobility, including conquest and colonisation.

[2] Notably, legislation on topics including international relations (including with the EU), immigration and asylum, social security, and employment and industrial relations remans reserved to the UK Government.

[3] From the research design stage, we had noted the permeability of these categories and sought to capture these nuances through incorporating the questions relevant for both incomers and long-term residents (see Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018, for similar discussion on categorical fluidity). Some Romanian and German respondents had been in their localities for some 20 years or more. Similarly, a few respondents returning to the areas where they were raised after 3 or 4 years studying at a university elsewhere were not considered in-migrants.

[4] A city in South-East England.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins 🅐 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9399-5486

Rhys Dafydd Jones 🅐 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1231-7529

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