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The Tourism-Migration Nexus: Accessing Care and Support as a Retired British National in Spain

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: The movement of older people from one country to another has been described in a multitude of ways, including 'Residential Tourism' and 'International Retirement Migration'. Tourism is often the stepping stone to retirement migration and many older retirees live fluid lifestyles where home ownership, access to welfare and social networks are maintained across the home and host countries both physically and through technology.
OBJECTIVES: This paper focuses on older British people in Spain, and explores the strategies employed to access support in later life. It draws on grid-group cultural theory to explore the social network configurations that include the individual, their local and transnational community, as well as the wider socio-cultural context within which they are located.
METHODS: The paper draws on data from interviews with 25 older British people in Spain.
CONCLUSION: The paper exemplifies four different 'types' of social network organization and how these relate to help seeking behavior in later life.

Keywords: International retirement migration, residential tourism, Spain, UK, social networks, support

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1. Introduction

The movement of older people from one country to another has been described in a multitude of ways, including as 'Residential Tourism' (Janoschka and Haas, 2014), 'International Retirement Migration' (King, Cela and Fokkema, 2021; King, 2000), and 'Lifestyle Migration' (Janoschka and Haas, 2014; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). This paper focuses on retired British people who are living in Spain for all or most of their time and whilst they will be referred to here as international retirement migrants (IRMs), they are often described under all of these terms. They are a group who are often difficult to conceptualize and identify, with many being undocumented as they may move back and forth between Spain and the UK (and elsewhere) (O'Reilly, 2007). The distinction between migration and tourism in this context is therefore a fluid one, often involving complex mobility patterns (Mohring, 2014).

British migration to Spain, which increased dramatically in the late 20th century, has grown in tandem with mass tourism in response to structural factors including improved international transportation and tourist infrastructure, as well as an increased affluence and early retirement options (Huete and Mantecon, 2012; O'Reilly, 2012). Spain remains the most popular retirement migration destination for British nationals (Giner-Monfort and Hall, 2024), due to its lower costs of living costs and warm climate along with extensive tourist infrastructure and widespread use of the English language. There is a strong connection between tourism and migration movements and a growing body of research on the tourism-retirement nexus has shown how foreign holidays influence retirement migration decisions and destinations (King, Cela and Fokkema, 2021; Casado-Diaz et al., 2014). Migration is normally taken to involve permanent settlement in the destination country, but in reality, IRMs often find creative ways to live in more than one place at a time by altering their migration and legal patterns at will (O'Reilly, 2007). For example, as will be demonstrated below, some IRMs do not become resident in the host

country and plan to permanently return one day, in essence behaving like residential tourists. Return is also particularly common as migrants age and develop care needs (Giner-Monfort and Hall, 2024).

IRMs are therefore situated within a complex set of structural, cultural and social contexts that shape their migration journeys and experiences. However, these intersecting contexts have not previously been explored in research; a gap that this paper addresses. It draws on grid-group cultural theory to explore how the interplay of social, cultural and structural factors shape how IRMs access support in old age. It focuses on a previously under-researched group of IRMs, those who are older and facing vulnerability due to an increasing need for support and care as they age.

2. The social and support networks of older migrants

Most older British people move to already established British communities in Spain on the coast, where infrastructure including shops, bars and restaurants cater to British tastes (Ahmed, 2015; Huete and Mantecon, 2012). There are plenty of opportunities for social engagement within these communities including through social clubs, volunteering and socializing, and so there is some segregation from the Spanish community (Hall, 2023; O'Reilly, 2017; 2000). Retired migrants therefore often retain a strong British identity in Spain and maintain active ties with family and friends in the UK through visits and technology (Casado-Diaz et al., 2014). These strong connections to the UK can even lead to the rejection of bureaucracy and official regulation, including non-registration (Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010), again indicating a blurred boundary between migration and tourism. Since Brexit, UK nationals can no longer move freely within EU national states e.g. they can no longer move back and forth between the UK and Spain as they choose, leading to increasing numbers of such migrants becoming legally resident in Spain (Giner-Monfort and Hall, 2024). They have also faced increased uncertainty in their status as migrants (and tourists) due to complex visa and residency rules (Hall et al., 2020; Hall and Kilkey, 2025).

The social networks of older British migrants in Spain can therefore be complex and transcend national borders, with some migrants maintaining strong social networks in the UK, whilst for others, links become weak or dissipate following migration (Casado-Diaz et al., 2014; Huber and O'Reilly, 2004; Hall and Hardill, 2016). Older British people in Spain have been labelled 'transmigrants' (O'Reilly, 2007), whereby they belong to two or more countries at the same time and construct dual lives across national borders (Vertovec, 2005). These 'micro' level social networks are therefore situated within a highly regulated wider social, political and cultural context, with citizenship rights, access to welfare and freedom of movement, all impacting on migrant's day-to-day relationships and mobility practices. The intersection of social networks and regulatory structures is however a notable gap in the prior IRM research, particularly in relation to the diversity of ways in which IRMs access support and care as they age.

This paper therefore explores the social networks of older British people in Spain and how these are used to obtain support as they age. It focuses on how an individual's social, cultural and political environment can determine their help seeking behavior in old age. To explore these intersections, the paper draws on grid-group cultural theory, a framework that explores how social integration and social regulation shape how an individual responds to threats and opportunities (Douglas, 1982; 2005). The application of grid-group theory thereby enables a stronger conceptualization of diverse migrant networks and help-seeking behaviours. Using data from narrative interviews with 25 older British people in Spain, the paper exemplifies four different 'types' of social organization that can help to understand the coping strategies of vulnerable older British migrants in Spain. It particularly explores the way in which social networks and support strategies transcend national boundaries, including the role of technology in sustaining such relationships.

3. Theoretical Framework: Grid-Group Cultural Theory

Grid-group cultural theory was developed by Douglas (1982:7) to "predict or explain which intellectual strategies are useful for survival in a particular pattern of social relations". It has been used to explain how the structure of personal relations is culturally based, as identified through two dimensions of sociality labelled 'Grid' and 'Group'. The 'Group' dimension represents social integration or the strength of group ties/bonds (Douglas, 2005). In other words, it looks at the extent to which individuals partake in group rather than individual activities. At one end of the dimension individuals are closely bonded e.g. have close friends, family and community connections and at the other end are those with individualistic tendencies who have few close ties e.g. are highly isolated. The 'Grid' dimension represents social regulation or 'the cross-hatch of rules to which individuals are subject in the course of their interaction' (Douglas, 1982:192). In other words, how social behavior is constrained by externally imposed rules and regulations, such as citizenship and legal frameworks that enable or constrain access to social welfare for migrants. At one end of the dimension an individual is highly regulated, whilst at the other end the individual has a greater degree of voluntary choice.

By combining the Grid and Group dimensions on two axes, four styles of social organization emerge. This is a cultural map against which individuals (or groups) can be plotted (Duval, 2006). It has been utilized to explore friendship patterns (6, 2004), motivations for volunteering (Hardill *et al.* 2007), entrepreneurship and social capital among immigrants (Caulkins and Peters 2002) and tourism motivation (Li et al., 2015). Duval (2006) used grid-group

theory to explore how links between migration and tourism can be used to explain why migrants return to their homeland. The Grid dimension referred to the strength of transnational social bonds and Group refers to transnational belonging or "how much a migrant's world view encompasses more than their current place of residence" (Duval, 2006:8). The result is a conceptualization of how migrants might organize their transnational social spaces and time as both migrants and tourists.

In this current paper, grid-group theory is used to explore how older migrants draw on their social networks to access support as they age. The 'group' dimension represents levels of social integration i.e. the nature of group bonds with family, friends, neighbors and community groups and the 'grid' dimension represents levels of institutional, social and cultural regulation. This results in four distinct types of social network organization, labelled: Isolate, Hierarchy, Enclave and Individualist (see Figure 1).

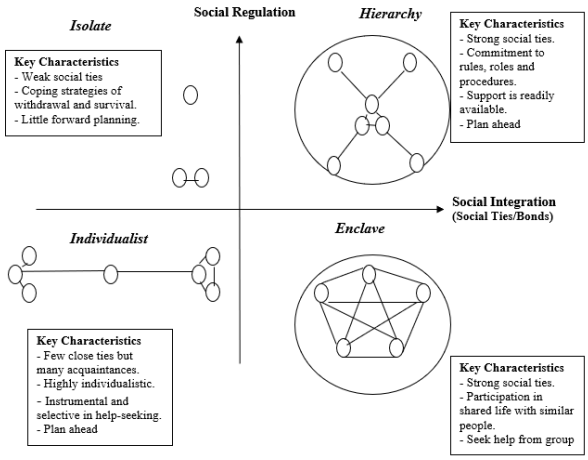

Figure 1 – Grid and Group Framework

Source: Adapted from Hardill, Baines and 6 (2007:401)

First, in the top right quadrant, the "Hierarchy" types (6, 2004) are highly integrated and regulated. They have strong links with formal organizations, and strong bridging capital encompassing people across diverse social groups (Putnam, 2000). Hierarchy types include migrants with a strong transnational participation (Duval 2006). They also "…favor tradition and continuity…must encourage respect, loyalty, obedience and the well-being of the community…and take the long term into account" (Douglas, 2005:7). Second, in the bottom right quadrant, those with strong integration but weak regulation have been termed "Enclave" (Douglas, 2005). They avoid social differentiation within the group (ibid) and so social networks are heavily concentrated to ties with people in the immediate locality, as is especially common in ethnically homogenous neighborhoods (Hardill *et al.,* 2007). This is indicative of bonding social capital between homogenous groups, and so reinforces exclusive identities (Putnam, 2000). Regulation tends to be through informal mechanisms and self-imposed constraints.

Third, in the bottom left quadrant, "Individualism" (Douglas, 2005) relates to both weak regulation and integration. From this emerges a competitive and individualistic culture where the well-being of the individual is greater than that of the community. The prominent virtues are individual courage, intelligence, perseverance, and success (ibid). Whilst Individualists may not have vast social networks, they may have many acquaintance-like connections with people who can be used in instrumental ways to seek out information, opportunities and social status (Hardill *et al.,* 2007). Fourth, in the top left quadrant, the weakly integrated but strongly regulated "Isolates" (Douglas, 2005) have few social ties and limited networks other than a few longstanding friends, neighbors or family members (Hardill *et al.,* 2007). Their lack of group cohesion prevents them from influencing the rules that control their lives and leading to limited autonomy (Fisher, 2009). They sustain coping strategies for survival using any resources or opportunities they encounter (Hardill *et al.,* 2007).

The framework is being used here to categorize older British migrant's social network configurations that include the individual, their local and transnational community, as well as the wider socio-cultural context within which they are located. It is used to explore differences in how older migrants access support and respond to crises as they age.

4. Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative interviews to gather in-depth accounts of migrant experiences and their perspectives on the social, cultural and structural contexts within which they are embedded A total of 25 older British people living in Spain were interviewed; five interviews were with a married couple and so the total number of households included was 20. All of the respondents had experienced a decline in health, needed care and/or had financial difficulties which are key indicators of vulnerability (Grundy, 2006). The average age of all interviewees was 78.25 years, although they ranged from 51 to 93 years. Only two interviewees under the age of 60 were included and they had both experienced considerable health and care issues and so met the 'vulnerable' inclusion criteria. Fourteen interviewees were over the age of 80. Initial screening of potential interviewees was undertaken through a series of questions (participants were offered these in written or verbal format) to determine their age, health, care and financial circumstances. Therefore, only those identified as vulnerable were included, although the degree of vulnerability and the impact of this on their quality of life and level of independence varied among the participants and became explicit through the interview.

Sixteen interviewees were female and nine were male. All except one of the participants were permanent residents in Spain and the number of years lived in Spain ranged from one to 34 years. Households were located in the Costa Blanca (n=8), Costa del Sol (n=7) and Mallorca (n=5).

The interviews took a narrative approach focusing on story-telling to explore participant's understandings and interpretations from their own perspective (Peel and Wilson, 2008). The life story approach gave the opportunity to explore the relation between personal and collective experiences (Rogers and Leydesdorff, 1999) and the impact that social, cultural and political structures had on these experiences. A topic guide was used, but interviewees were encouraged to tell their individual and collective (at a household level) life stories (narratives) relating to experiences, values and relationships. In thirteen of the households an individual was interviewed, in four households' interviews were with a married couple and three interviews were with one older person and other members of their wider family (usually daughters). Interviewees were recruited through a British-run voluntary organization in Spain for older people (over 50s). Whilst this recruitment strategy is recognized to limit the sample to those already engaged with support services, the strategy provides access to an otherwise 'hard-to-reach' and often isolated population and one that is older than prior research on IRM (Hall, 2023). The recruitment strategy also provided a welfare dimension, as interviewees could be referred back to the support service if safeguarding or support needs emerged.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were analyzed using a narrative approach, with the purpose being to emphasize the stories that participants told (Ahmed, 2015). The data was coded using NVivo software, beginning with the development of a coding framework based on the theoretical interests guiding the research questions and the recurring themes that arose in the text itself (Attride-Stirling 2001). The coding framework was focused around the grid--group framework and each participant was assigned to a type based on their degree of integration and regulation; but also recognizing that some spanned multiple types. An 'ideal' type is therefore presented in the analysis that follows. A second stage of analysis was then undertaken within each grid-group 'type' to identify sub-themes (Fielding 2008). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the author's academic institution. Participants were provided with an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form prior to interview. All data was treated confidentially and pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of individuals.

5. Findings

The four types of social organization (Isolate, Hierarchist, Enclave and Individualist) are now discussed drawing on indicative quotes to highlight lived experiences. Within each, an ideal type is presented but it is recognized that some people live under hybrid forms (Hardill *et al.,* 2007) that span characteristics from two or more of the types. Due to the complexity of life, especially during old age, the types are also not static, and some movement between types was noted, especially as individuals age and their circumstances change.

5.1 The Enclaves

In the bottom right quadrant of Figure 1 are the weakly regulated but strongly integrated "Enclaves" (Douglas, 2005). The average age of the six Enclave interviewees was 73.6 years, with half being over 80 years. Two were married (and both were interviewed as a couple) and two were widowed. They had spent an average of 9 years living in Spain, however this ranged from 4 to 21 years, with the majority (5 out of 6) living there for six years or less. The Enclaves had large social networks and strong social ties; however, these networks were located within the British community, and many had already established relationships in Spain through prior visits as tourists. Due to their shared group life, they tended to reject external rules and instead regulate themselves through informal mechanisms.

The Enclaves were highly independent, as shown by Eleanor, an 83-year-old widow. Eleanor was frail with limited mobility, but she made a determined effort to socialize and maintain social relationships:

> I'm not lonely or miserable or anything because I have got a lot of friends, but sometimes it seems empty. I am not miserable in myself. Sometimes I get a bit perhaps depressed, but I shake it off because that's how I am. I try to get out to go to the Chinese [restaurant] with some of the ladies for the birthday (Elenor, 83, Widowed)

The strong British identities of the Enclaves meant that, like most tourists, they could speak little or no Spanish. They felt that there was "no need" to learn the language:

> My problem is that I mix with too many English people…I suppose really, I should go to Spanish lessons, but I don't really feel the need at the moment. (Rachael, 68, Widowed)

They were therefore the most likely to adopt what scholars have labelled an "enclave mentality" (Champion and King, 1993), which is strongly linked with tourism. They all lived within established British communities on urbanizations, which are purpose-built complexes used for both tourist and residential purposes**,** which lie outside of historic village centers and have their own shops, restaurants and personal service outlets (Huber and O'Reilly, 2004). Many had previously visited Spain (often the same area as they lived in) as tourists, before buying a property and then migrating to Spain.

The Enclaves displayed strong bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) which includes those with whom they share similar characteristics and a common identity (Hardill *et al.,* 2007), however, this can however act as a barrier to wider integration. Bonding capital was also evident through the Enclave's use of British social clubs,

which were an integral part of their daily life (Betty and Cahill, 1990) and all of the Enclaves were members of at least one social club that were used to establish and maintain friendships with other British people, as Richard and Victoria, a married couple (aged 67) explained:

> Richard: You can see it in the papers, there are just pages and pages of clubs. I think if you have got a hobby, you could do it here in Spain.
> Victoria: We do Irish roll bowls, and we go to a slimming club on a Friday, all be it that it doesn't work very well. It's good anyway, it's got a social side to it.
> Richard: And then friends, social, always going out for dinner somewhere. Marvellous.

Whilst these clubs provide social opportunities, they are also an avenue for information, help and support. This includes information on bureaucracy and health services and indicates the unofficial and informal nature of support. Friends also provided information and support, including on health and healthcare as Rachel explained:

> A friend has told me to get checked out [a health check]. (Rachael, 68, Widowed)

Their links to the UK had also remained strong, with longstanding friendships maintained through visits and communication technologies or phone. Their British identity also led to most saying that they will likely return to the UK in the future, especially if they experience a decline in health or develop care needs:

> The immediate future, as things are, we will stay but if things get really worse and we can't find help if you need help, then we will go back (Victoria, 67, Married)

One of the Enclaves had even retained British residency and was living as a 'tourist' in Spain. Rachel spent much of the year in Spain and the remaining time living with her daughter in the UK (which she used as her permanent residence address for legal purposes). Her main reason for remaining resident in the UK was to continue using the NHS, indicating her lack of commitment to formal rules and regulations. She explained how she moved back and forth between Spain and the UK depending on her health needs:

> I had a mammogram done [in Spain] last June and something did show up …so I went off to England…and saw my doctor because I am still on the national health in England you see. (Rachael, 68, Widowed)

The Enclaves therefore had 'split networks' (Pahl and Spencer, 2004) that spanned Spain and the UK. They maintained a strong collective British identity and had an emotional and physical attachment to the UK, thereby sharing many of the characteristics of residential tourists.

5.2 The Individualists

In the bottom left quadrant of *Figure 1* are the weakly integrated and weakly regulated "Individualists" (Douglas, 2005). The average age of the six interviewees was 78.7 years, ranging from 62 to 90 years. Three were married (one couple were interviewed together), two were divorced and one was single. They had spent an average of 19 years living in Spain; ranging from 4 to 30 years. Whilst the Individualists had few close ties with people, their extensive time in Spain meant that they have many 'contacts' and acquaintances that are used instrumentally to promote individual success. Social ties included people across different social groups, indicating strong levels of bridging social capital, which encompassed people across diverse social cleavages (Putnam, 2000). Their networks included Spanish and British (and other) nationalities and were used instrumentally to seek information and support as required.

The individualists were extremely independent, rarely relying on others for support, and when they did need help, sought help from the most appropriate source. They chose to solve their own problems whenever possible indicating that they rarely conformed to formal regulation and procedures:

> I don't like to impose myself on people like that. I can look after myself as I have done all my life (Donald, 80, Single)

Social ties were often generated and used for instrumental purposes to bypass formal processes. Despite no longer being resident in the UK, Robin maintained contact with his British GP to retain access to the NHS, which highlights strong transnational tendencies, despite living in Spain for many decades:

> I am still registered with my GP [in the UK] as well. I email him all my treatment I get here. I either fax it or email it to him so he is up to date with what I am getting here. (Robin, 62, Married)

Many also retained access to the UK welfare system and used their network strategically to enable this. For example, Robin's links to a British MP helped him to appeal for UK disability benefits:

> I got onto this high guy, this guy who works in Derbyshire and he's an MP and he's sticking up for me and saying I'm perfectly right, we are part of the European Community. (Robin, 62, Married)

Whilst their social ties may not have been emotionally strong, these ties were diverse and included those in positions of power, thereby enabling the individualists to seek informal solutions in response to challenges. Donald who was partially sighted, befriended members of his local police force in Spain through whom he accessed information and support:

> I have made quite a lot of friends in Spain, particularly Guardia Civil strangely enough, that's the police force. A police officer and his wife lived across the road, I got to know them, and they introduced me to many of their fellow officers. (Donald, 80, Single)

This bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) enabled the Individualists to access information and support. Most were well integrated and spoke fluent Spanish, which sets them apart from most tourists. Many of the Individualists

had previously lived or worked abroad, either in Spain or elsewhere, which may be the reason for their high levels of integration. Whilst they still identified themselves as British, they only retained instrumental ties to the UK (for help-seeking behavior) and did not express a desire to return. They displayed transnational behavior and most retained strategic links to the UK, but they also actively differentiated themselves from tourists and non-integrated British migrants like the Enclaves.

5.3 Hierarchy

In the top right quadrant of Figure 1 are the strongly integrated and strongly regulated "Hierarchy" types (6, 2004). They are characterized by high levels of social cohesion and social networks that span diverse groups, meaning support was plentiful. In contrast to the Individualists, they are committed to formal rules and regulation so were most likely to seek help through formal mechanisms. They were a highly diverse group. Their ages ranged from 51 to 86 years (with the average being 72.4 years). Out of the five Hierarchy participants, two were widowed, one was divorced, and one couple (interviewed together) were married. Two households had spent seven years in Spain whilst the remaining two for over 15 years.

All Hierarchy types maintained a close relationship with family in the UK through visits and communication technology. Support from family was readily available and was practical and emotional in nature. For example, when Ida was ill, her daughter came over from the UK to provide care and support:

> My daughter had to feed me with a spoon because doing anything, just holding something, you know [was difficult] and I had to take an enormous amount of [medicine] (Ida, 79, Divorced)

Friends were diverse and plentiful, and included Spanish and British people. They had many people to turn to during times of crisis or hardship, as Amy explained when she was experiencing financial problems following the death of her husband:

> The Pension Service put a block on my account… I went to the bank and nobody would tell me… My dad is ringing up and he was trying to find out... All I got told, through my boss who spoke fluent Spanish was that my account was blocked, and it was to do with my pension… My best friend is with me, she keeps coming up and down, she speaks fluent Spanish, but she has never been in this position (Amy, 51, Widowed)

Some of the Hierarchy types lived within a Spanish community and were well integrated. Fred and Felicity spoke about being invited along to local Spanish events, such as weddings:

> If someone has a birthday, the Mallorquians, not so much now but going back a couple of years, it was always in a restaurant, and everything was free and everyone from the village that they know was invited. You find now, if there is a wedding, you are invited (Fred, 86, Married)

All Hierarchy types could speak Spanish and they had made the decision to integrate before moving. Most chose to live in Spanish communities and had learnt Spanish before moving and like Ida, sought out Spanish friends to help them learn the language:

> I had a Spanish friend. I met her on the bus and she said something in French to me and because I used to speak French, and we got talking and … she taught me quite a lot of Spanish when we used to go for walks along the cliff at night (Ida, 79, Divorced)

Unlike the Enclaves, most had a strong emotional attachment to Spain and felt that Spain was their home and so were clearly distinguished from tourists in this regard:

> If someone said to me in England, are you going back to Mallorca and I would say I am going home. To me, Spain is my home (Felicity, 80, Married)

Despite this, and unlike the Individualists, they did however also maintain strong emotional and physical ties to the UK. They had strong transnational relationships with family and friends in the UK and often returned for visits. Also, in contrast to the Individualists, they were part of the British community in Spain. It was during times of crisis that they were most likely to turn to the British community for help. This included British friends and British social clubs in Spain:

> We need the [British] charities yes, we always need that because they provide a network of support and they do a lot out here. They have clubs and it's good for people to go to them. If you still want to retain that link, even if you do not want to live in the UK, you still want to maintain that Englishness. Discuss things that happen in the UK with other people. You want that. Sometimes friends that are English, particularly in times of stress or when you are grieving (Amy, 51, Widowed)

The Hierarchy types were very proactive in their help-seeking behavior and used their informal and formal support networks very effectively to access support. They also placed trust in experts and institutions and had a commitment to formal rules and regulations. They were all registered with their local Town Hall (Padron), whilst many of the Enclaves and Individualists were not. Felicity spoke about the importance of Spanish regulation:

> The only thing that I would say to anyone coming [to Spain], live by their rules…there are people that come here and they say I am not going to register, and we know a lot of people here who are not registered. But to us, we live in a foreign land, so therefore you go by their rules. (Felicity, 80, Married)

The Hierarchy types therefore, whilst being highly integrated, are also highly regulated; however, this is out of choice rather than necessity due to a desire to 'do things properly'. The Hierarchy types were therefore highly

transnational (Vertovec, 2005), as they maintained strong ties to the UK, whilst living a full and integrated life in Spain.

5.4 The Isolates

The weakly integrated but strongly regulated "Isolates" are characterized by weak social ties and a lack of autonomy. They were the oldest group, ranging from 74 to 93 years with an average age of 84.6 years. It is recognized that their age may be indicative of their higher levels of vulnerability, particularly associated with declining mobility and health. They had been living in Spain for between 18 months and 34 years, averaging 16.8 years - the longest of all four types. Two of the eight Isolates were married (and interviewed together) and the remaining six were widowed. They tended to have only a few longstanding friends, neighbors or family members that they heavily relied on. They displayed high levels of loneliness and social isolation. Isolates have been identified as "getting by" (Hardill *et al.,* 2007); they are people who employ coping strategies for survival with any resources or opportunities they encounter and often rely on others to generate support for them.

One key feature that distinguished some of the Isolates, is that some moved to *receive* or *provide* care. Five (including one couple) had moved to Spain to live with or near to their daughter who already lived there. One moved to *provide care for* her grandchildren, and four moved when they were in their 80s *to receive care* from their daughter following a decline in their health whilst living in the UK. Moving to receive care is rarely explored in the international retirement migration literature (except see Hall, 2024), with motivations for migration contrasting with the motivations of most retired migrants (including every other interviewee in this study) who moved to seek a more active and outdoor lifestyle during the 'third age' of life (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Some had not spent any time in Spain before, including as tourists, distinguishing them from both residential tourists and lifestyle migrants.

International migration to be close to family once frailty sets in has been shown to cause social isolation and dislocation resulting in a high dependence on family (Ackers, 2004; Wilson, 2000). Cross-country movements in later life are usually associated with a return to the homeland (Ackers, 2004), rather than outward migration like the Isolates. These four interviewees encountered isolation, dislocation and vulnerability after arriving in Spain and they made few friends, rarely socialized and were highly dependent on their daughter. Barbara moved to Spain from the UK following a decline in her health, and whilst she initially lived with her daughter, had since experienced a further decline in health and moved into residential care. Her daughter explained how isolated she now was:

> I pop in obviously, or she has a meal downstairs or I take her to my house. But other than that, she just sits in here and can't move. (Daughter of Barbara, 93, Widowed)

The remaining three who moved for care, lived with their daughter. However, following a decline in their health and growing care needs, were all planning a return move to residential care or sheltered accommodation in the UK. Lauren and Steven's daughter spoke about how her parents had been extremely isolated and unhappy during the nine years they lived with her in Spain:

> [My parents] want to have someone to talk to of their own age and in the same language and somewhere with shops nearby and places that they can walk to. (Daughter of Lauren and Steven, 93/87, Married)

The remaining four Isolates moved to Spain when they were relatively mobile and in good health but had since become Isolates in Spain following a decline in health and/or the death of their spouse. As they aged, they were less mobile (e.g. could no longer drive or could not walk unaided) and so were unable to maintain their friendships in Spain. Their relationships with friends in the UK were also difficult to maintain due to barriers of distance or because friends had passed away. Their transnational participation was therefore limited by access to financial and/or physical resources (Duval, 2006).

Whilst the Isolates had been living in Spain longer than any other type, they were the least integrated, spoke little or no Spanish and had no or few Spanish friends. Any social contact they had was confined to the British community. They had all moved into a British community, as Elsa who moved to Spain 18 years ago with her husband, explained:

> If we had come to Spain and had moved further inland you would have had to learn the language, but coming here everybody around you is English and of course when they speak in your language, they are the ones you have got to talk to. If we had moved inland, we would have had to learn to be friends with Spanish people. (Elsa, 78, Widowed)

Isolation from the Spanish community left the Isolates struggling to access care, financial support or social support from Spanish statutory or voluntary organizations. This left them feeling disconnected and constrained. Those that did not have family in Spain were largely dependent on British-run charities in Spain (Hall and Hardill, 2016) that provided help with translation, accessing care and also returning to the UK. Six out of the eight Isolates were planning to return permanently to the UK. The role of the British charities in this was outlined by Barbara's daughter:

> I got in touch with [voluntary organization] and as I say [volunteer] has done it all. I asked them what could be done. I didn't suggest that. It was [voluntary organization] that suggested repatriation. I said I didn't know that could be done. It's in their hands really. (Daughter of Barbara, 93, Widowed)

The Isolates therefore had little control over their return which was being organized by their family or a charity. Some wanted to return whilst others were being forced to return to access care. They were therefore a mixed group

but collectively had the strong British identities and connections to the UK. They all moved into established British communities, some of these were familial and most had few connections with Spain prior to moving, differentiating them from both residential tourists and other migrants.

6. Conclusion

This paper has extended knowledge on the social and support networks of older British people in Spain, especially on how local and transnational networks are utilized in a diversity of ways to obtain support in old age. It focuses on a group of older migrants in Spain, all of whom were facing health, financial or other challenges that made them vulnerable. Prior research has stressed the important role of strong social networks and social integration to help overcome vulnerability (Schroder-Butterfill and Marianti, 2006 Grundy, 2006), but has not explored how cultural and structural factors also shape access to support. Therefore, grid-group theory has been used to explore how help-seeking behavior lies at the intersection of migrant's personal social networks and the wider social, cultural and political environments within which they are located.

Social networks are often viewed as static and for older people, focused on the role of proximate family (Grundy, 2006). Instead, this paper explores how networks can be geographically dispersed, spanning multiple locations at the same time. Networks also comprise a combination of formal and informal, as well as physical and virtual social connections that can enable migrants to respond to the challenges that they face. These social connections can be located locally and transnationally, and are shaped by external rules and regulations e.g. legal frameworks and welfare rights that enable or restrict access to pensions, welfare benefits or residency. This paper therefore offers a new contribution to literature by drawing on grid-group theory to explore how the interplay of social integration and regulation can lead to different types of help-seeking behavior in later life. The analysis has led to the emergence of four types of social network organization; Isolate, Enclave, Individualist and Hierarchy.

Drawing on a 'transnational' lens (Vertovec, 2005), it demonstrates the ways in which older IRMs are 'transmigrants', whereby their identities and social networks span two or more countries at the same time (O'Reilly, 2007). All of the migrants in this study had retained formal and informal connections to the UK and some planned to return. As with Duval (2006), it shows how links between migration and tourism allow a stronger understanding of how migrants organize their transnational social spaces, and how their access to support encompasses more than their current place of residence. Migrants' connections to both Spain and the UK varied across the four 'types'.

The Isolates and Enclaves maintained strong social and emotional connections to the UK, and many had strong social connections to British people in Spain prior to moving. Beyond their British networks, they had few social connections to Spain and were not integrated. These characteristics, which are more aligned to those of tourists than migrants, meant that during times of crisis or need, they were most likely to return to the UK and many had already put pans in place to return. For the Isolates, return was often in response to a crisis e.g. a care or financial crisis, and further exacerbated their vulnerability, Alternatively, for the Hierarchy and Individualist types, integration in Spain was strong and connections to the UK were more instrumental. They displayed strong transnational participation. They were more likely to seek help and support from Spain, through formal or informal channels, rather than return to the UK. As a result, they were less vulnerable than the Isolates and Enclaves, and so better able to cope successfully with the challenges they faced (Grundy, 2006).

Exploring the characteristics, experiences and networks of each 'type' can therefore help us to understand different forms of help seeking behavior among older migrants and identify when some migrants may need additional support and help. It also sheds light on how social and cultural connections can influence the decisions of migrants to return to their homeland. These findings therefore offer valuable insights for policy makers in the UK and Spain to better meet the needs of older migrants and plan welfare services accordingly.

The grid-group framework used in this study has presented four ideal 'types'. However, it must be noted that these categories are not static. An individual can therefore move between types, especially as they age or their circumstances change. For example, before her husband died, Elsa would have been an Enclave type as she had many British friends and attended a wide range of British-led social clubs. However, as a 78-year-old widow, she had lost contact with her friends and had limited mobility to socialize, making her an Isolate. On the other hand, Eleanor, an 83-year-old widow, is also very frail and suffers from severe health problems, but has remained an Enclave as despite her challenges retains her independence and a good social life. This therefore captures the complexity of life during old age.

Whilst maintaining a focus on British IRMs in Spain, this study offers insights into how social structures and cultural contexts influence migrants' experiences and help-seeking behavior in later life. The research has relevance in other contexts where retirement migrants are now ageing, both within and beyond Europe, including regions such as Southeast Asia which are experiencing growing numbers of retirement migrants. Further research on international retirement migration in such regions is recommended. Whilst a key limitation of this study is that it focuses on a relatively small group of retirement migrants, all of whom had contact with a voluntary organization, it does highlight the previously noted important role of voluntary organizations in ensuring the wellbeing of older migrants (Hall and Kilkey, 2025; Hardill et al, 2006). Further research should however include those

'seldom heard' retirement migrants who do not have the support of these organizations and may face higher levels of vulnerability.

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