

Leaving, coming and ‘going back’: How caring responsibilities create volatile futures for migrants

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how young migrants’ future plans in the UK were destabilised by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Uncertainty around health, employment, and most crucially, the well-being of family members in their countries of origin prompted many to reconsider return migration or the possibility of relocating relatives to the UK, concerns that had previously been marginal. While migration studies often centre on individual agency, this research shows how family obligations and shifting external conditions reshape migrants’ trajectories and priorities. A recurring theme is the paradox of desiring a return while continually postponing it due to structural and emotional constraints. Migrants found themselves caught between securing a stable future abroad and fulfilling caregiving responsibilities: financial, practical, and emotional, toward loved ones at home. Based on online interviews with 27 young and highly skilled migrants conducted between December 2020 and September 2021, the paper highlights how crises such as COVID-19 recalibrate migration decisions. It contributes to debates on return migration and transnational care by foregrounding temporality and migrants’ future imaginaries, showing how a once-distant future becomes an immediate and pressing concern, and reshaping the meaning of belonging and home.

KEYWORDS: migration, COVID-19, transnational family, youth mobility

INTRODUCTION

“Time is a challenging concept. The term means both too much and too little and is simultaneously overanalysed and taken for granted” (Griffiths, 2014:1992).

Migration inherently raises questions about the past (where migrants come from), present (where they are now), and future (where they envi-

sion themselves). For the migrants central to this study, their transnational lives, straddling both worlds, entail constant movement between the past (through circular migration and visits home), present (life in the host country), and future aspirations. As Griffiths et al. (2013:np) note, these shifts create “complex and contradictory relationships between the past, present, and future, which are likely to exist in tension simultaneously for individuals”. While time has been a recurring theme in migration research, much of it focuses on legal status. This study, however, examines time through a personal and emotional lens. Research on time in migration often applies to irregular migrants or those limited by legal stay, yet it frequently overlooks those who have settled.

In this study, time is nonlinear and, as Gray (2011) suggests, often at odds with the dominant clock time. Different temporal experiences, ranging from natural and cultural time to social, bureaucratic, and industrial time (Hughes, 2022:194), can conflict, particularly among young people (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), as explored in this research.

For more recent migrants, who have access to modern communication technologies, transnational ties enable them to continually revisit their past experiences while actively imagining and negotiating their futures. Frequent travel home is both a spatial and temporal return, reinforcing migration’s non-linear temporality. Additionally, digital connectivity allows migrants to be virtually present in multiple places at once, further complicating their experience of time. The “global synchronisation of time” (Griffiths et al., 2013) intensifies their longing to exist physically in both locations simultaneously (Baas and Yeoh, 2019:163).

While scholars have explored COVID-19’s impact on migration (Triandafyllidou, 2020; 2022; Simola et al., 2023; Rajan, 2020), this paper bridges research on young, highly skilled migrants and transnational families, offering fresh insight into COVID-19’s role in reshaping return migration possibilities. It contributes to the scholarly literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how migrants negotiate the tensions between career aspirations and transnational caregiving responsibilities within the context of unprecedented global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. By centering the temporal experiences and future imaginaries of migrants during this volatile period, this research advances theoretical discussions on migration, transnational families, and migrant belonging. It highlights the complex interplay of mobility, care, and uncertainty, particularly shedding light on how these dynamics influence decisions regarding return

migration and the postponement or reconfiguration of long-term settlement plans. Importantly, this work foregrounds the role of temporality and migrants' conceptualisation of the future, an aspect often overlooked in migration studies, demonstrating how migrants' futures are not fixed but deeply contingent and shaped by shifting personal and structural circumstances. This shift transformed the 'not-yet' future into an immediate and pressing reality for many migrants. The next section reviews the literature on young, highly skilled migration and transnational families, followed by the methodology and findings.

AT THE CROSSROADS: YOUTH MOBILITIES AND TRANSITIONS¹

Broadly speaking, youth in this context refers to younger-age migrants, typically those aged 16 to 35 (King et al., 2016). This category primarily includes individuals who migrate either for higher education (HE), leaving home in their teenage years, or for employment opportunities after completing their education, usually departing in their early twenties. Regardless of the reason or timing of migration, such moves are often viewed as an 'investment' that "produces benefits which will eventually outweigh the costs of the move" (Sjaastad, 1962, cited in King et al., 2016:6). However, King et al. (2016) highlight the ambiguity surrounding the term 'highly-skilled', as there is no universal agreement on what qualifies a migrant as skilled or highly-skilled. The term may refer to holding a university degree, possessing significant professional experience, or reaching a certain income level (King et al., 2016:10). Given this variation, some argue that the focus should be on 'learning ability' rather than on predefined skills. Nevertheless, in this study, as in King et al. (2016), 'highly-skilled' refers to individuals with an HE degree (Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctorate).

Although youth is generally understood to include individuals aged 16 to 35, this definition remains contested, as youth should not be determined by chronological age alone but rather as a "life-course category which is socially and culturally constructed" (King et al., 2016:9). This relational concept of youth has undergone significant transformation in recent decades. As Moroşanu et al. (2019) observe, youth has been prolonged, a shift interpreted in contrasting ways. Traditionally, socially constructed

¹ 'Youth mobilities and transitions' is borrowed from Lulle and Russell King (2019)

markers for entering adulthood, such as moving from education to employment, leaving the parental home, and forming a family, are now increasingly delayed or disrupted. While this delay has multiple causes, it raises critical questions, particularly regarding youth migration. As “research on transitions to adulthood has largely been in non-migration contexts” (Moroşanu et al., 2019:1556), scholars have recently turned their attention to how migration influences these transitions (see Moroşanu et al., 2019; King et al., 2016; Lulle and King, 2019). Lulle and King (2019:152) note that “youth trajectories and transitions become more complex with the addition of spatial mobility,” while Moroşanu et al. (2019) identify two key ways migration intersects with adulthood transitions. First, some young people use migration as a means to delay adulthood. For instance, British youth often pursue study or travel abroad to postpone entering the labour market or permanently leave their parental home (see Waters et al., 2011). This trend is particularly evident within the European Union’s (EU) free movement framework, where Erasmus exchange programs enable HE students to study abroad for a semester or year to gain education and skills. Second, and more relevant to this research, migration is frequently employed as a strategy to accelerate adulthood. Rather than undergoing a gradual transition in their home country, some young people choose to migrate to fast-track their entry into adulthood. Within this framework, youth transitions in this study are understood as a process of becoming (Worth, 2009).

TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

In recent years, alongside the study of migrants’ newly established relationships in host countries, there has been growing scholarly interest in transnational relationships, particularly transnational families (e.g., Christou and King, 2010; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Reynolds and Zontini, 2007, 2014). This interest in transnational communication stems from the recognition that “migrants’ life spaces are not solely reducible to societal spaces either. Rather, they involve more fragmented and plurilocally situated transnational networks, at least as long as migrants’ significant others live far away” (Boccagni, 2010:4). Significant others primarily include family members ‘left behind’ and childhood friends, but may also extend to other relationships migrants maintain with their home countries. As Vertovec explains, “[migrants] have developed ‘a dual frame of reference’ through which they constantly compare their situation in their ‘home’ society to their situation in the ‘host’ society” (Vertovec, 2009:67, cited in Zontini, 2015:328).

Such relationships are often maintained through “bridging-distance practices, e.g. phone calls, money transfers, Internet communication, travels back home” (Boccagni, 2016:7), which aim to compensate for the absence caused by migration.

Furthermore, Castells (2001:126), a leading scholar on globalisation and network societies, observed that “geographical proximity in most countries no longer shapes social relationships.” Maintaining contact with people across borders, such as family members back home, creates a so-called virtual community (Komito, 2011). As new information and communication technologies have emerged, scholars have coined terms such as the “annihilation of space” and “death of distance” to describe their impact (Komito, 2011:1075). However, as Boccagni (2016:6) points out, “[m]igrants’ homewards attachments and their transnational caregiving practices are hardly a novelty or a prerogative of any given immigrant flow.” Similarly, Komito (2011:1076) emphasizes that “[m]uch is known about the effect of information and communication technologies on migrants’ relationship with home and host societies.” Nevertheless, transnational families remain a central focus of migration research. Baldassar (2008), for instance, highlights the emotional aspects of separation, while Skrbiš (2008) questions the role of emotions in negotiating transnational family life. May (2017) applied a temporal lens to explore the construction of communities, transnational relationships, and belonging. Missing kin and longing for togetherness are thus central to transnational family life, embodied in practices such as phone calls, remittances, and frequent visits.

Building on these insights, key sociological thinkers such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) theorize the increasing *individualisation* of family life in late modernity, where flexibility and autonomy coexist with heightened uncertainty and risk. Their work highlights the tensions migrants face in balancing career ambitions with caregiving responsibilities as family structures become more fluid but also more fragile across borders. Jamieson (1997) further elucidates how transnational families negotiate these tensions through ongoing emotional work and sustained commitments, despite geographical separation. Complementing these perspectives, Urry’s (2007) *mobilities paradigm* draws attention to how the movement of people and constraints on mobility fundamentally reshape family relations and the experience of time and space in migrants’ lives. These sociological frameworks deepen our understanding of the volatile futures migrants face, caught between the demands of transnational care and career mobility.

A significant turning point in scholarly perspectives on transnational families was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. As governments worldwide imposed movement restrictions, international travel became difficult if not impossible. Simola et al. (2023:46) note that while the pandemic posed challenges for all, “transnational families in which working-age and elderly family members live in different countries have encountered particular kinds of difficulties.” Several scholars have observed that transnational family practices often involve negative emotions, such as worry, guilt, and distress (see Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015)—which were exacerbated by the disruptions of COVID-19. With travel discouraged or outright restricted, family visits ceased, raising questions about whether “virtual co-presence is sufficient for generating relational closeness” (Urry, 2002, cited in Simola et al., 2023:47). Baldassar (2008:252) argues that “longing, missing and nostalgia are best resolved through physical co-presence, actually being bodily present with the longed-for person or in the longed-for place.” However, Simola et al. (2023) suggested that the reasons for the importance of in-person encounters remain unclear. Their research on transnational families affected by Finnish and Belgian COVID-19 restrictions demonstrated that “the connections sensed between family members—that also in normal times can be strong and powerful—were charged with an exceptional potency, manifested in [their] respondents’ urge to ‘be there’ in physical proximity to their families” (Simola et al., 2023:56).

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on research conducted as part of my doctoral project, which examined the experiences of young, highly skilled, and highly mobile migrants, navigating life in the UK. This thesis captures two critical thresholds in their lives: the act of migration and the process of coming of age. While initially motivated by personal experience, this research responds to a broader need to understand the growing number of young people who choose to grow up abroad and imagine the UK as either a temporary or permanent home. The overall aim was to contribute to the literature on migrant belonging by exploring how young migrants create attachments in a transnational context marked by flexibility, uncertainty, individuality, and openness to the new. During the research process, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a powerful force shaping their imaginaries of belonging and return, intensifying existing uncertainties, and elevating the theme of care in unexpected and revealing ways.

The research was conducted online, with fieldwork taking place between December 2020 and September 2021. This period was marked by fluctuating COVID-19 regulations in the UK, including national lockdowns, travel restrictions, and the gradual easing of measures following the vaccine roll-out in early 2021. While I was based primarily in Croatia during this time, I also spent short periods in the UK, depending on the travel and quarantine rules in place. All participants were physically present in the UK at the time of the interviews. These restrictions shaped not only my own mobility as a researcher, but also the participants' everyday experiences and future imaginaries, particularly those tied to care responsibilities and cross-border obligations. The fieldwork was also situated in the post-Brexit context, which emerged in some interviews as a source of additional uncertainty. For several EU participants, Brexit amplified concerns regarding residency rights, belonging, and bureaucratic navigation, often intersecting with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

This study is broadly defined as 'ethnographic,' as it integrates a range of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary methods from sociology, anthropology, and human geography (Crang and Cook, 2007:vii). In addition to interviews, the research included photo-elicitation and a counter-mapping prompt. In the photo-elicitation component, participants were invited to submit photographs representing a part of their transnational lives. However, the data analysed in this paper is drawn exclusively from the interviews.

The interviews were conducted online via MS Teams, allowing for geographic flexibility during a time of ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, then transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were thematically coded, focusing in particular on temporality, care, and (im)mobility. The semi-structured interviews were organised around several thematic blocks: migration trajectories and motivations; perceptions of home, transnational and UK-based relationships, and the overall idea of what it means to belong. Participants were approached through informal and snowball sampling. I aimed to explore transnational spaces that mostly take place in an online setting, as "the everyday lives of many individuals more often than not transcend the geographical locations in which classical fieldwork [takes] place, challenging ethnographers to include these social spaces in the demarcation of their fieldwork sites" (Boccagni and Schrooten, 2018:210). This provided a strong rationale and solid theoretical background for engaging with and observing such activities through the same medium. Boccagni (2016:2) similarly notes that, to do

fieldwork in a transnational context, researchers must adopt a ‘relational approach to spatiality’ (Amelina and Faist, 2012), made effective through alternative forms of contact such as the online space or a transnational social space.

The interviews were almost always pleasant, with participants mostly thanking me for the opportunity to have this conversation. The fact that the interviews took place online was beneficial here, as I always scheduled the interviews according to the participants’ availability and preference. This sometimes included having interviews late in the evening or during weekends, but it is common that “virtual world activity takes place outside regular work hours” (Boellstorff et al., 2012:72). It is important to acknowledge that the participants I interviewed “do not reflect the totality of the temporal experience of immigrants, since immigrants are also ordinary people whose experience in many respects does not differ from that of ‘native’ residents. However, in several other respects, their experiences differ, and it is those fault lines, in which new temporalities are inscribed, that I set out to describe” (Cwerner, 2001:18).

The project adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the University of Nottingham and was approved by the School of Sociology and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent before taking part in the study, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

In total, I interviewed 27 migrants, although I engaged with many more throughout the research process. Sixteen participants originated from EU member states, while eleven came from non-EU countries. Regarding gender identity, 19 participants identified as female, seven as male, and one as non-binary. In terms of age, all participants were in their twenties or early thirties and had lived in the UK for a minimum of one year at the time of the interviews. The sample reflected a diverse geographic distribution, with participants residing in 13 different locations across the UK.

FINDINGS: POSTPONED FUTURES

When considering the future, many of us may find uncertainty a new challenge, yet “there are many in our society for whom such uncertainty has been a familiar companion for some time” (Hughes, 2017:np). For young and highly skilled migrants, the concept of the future is not only distant

but also abstract and highly volatile. While uncertain, futures are often postponed and sometimes described as 'not yet' futures - where the future is not a "homogenous period but can be split in various ways, including between the near future and a longer-term horizon" (Guyer, 2007, cited in Griffiths et al., 2013:np).

Amid increasing global uncertainty, migrants have begun to question their life decisions and reassess their priorities. Manuela, a Colombian PhD student, draws a connection between imagining a home and imagining a future:

"So let's say I have a home here. I have a close group of friends that it took me more than a year and a half to gather and [it] is still under building, and I also have a relationship with my girlfriend, which I can say is now home. However, I cannot say that is home and is going to be home because I cannot. There is so much uncertainty about the future for now."

This example illustrates how, despite personal relationships creating a sense of home, the uncertainty of the future prevents Manuela from fully perceiving the UK as her home. A key theme that emerged when discussing future plans was that, beyond being uncertain, migrants often spoke of short-term futures. When asked whether they envisioned staying in the UK permanently, responses were frequently inconclusive. Even those who previously imagined a long-term future in the UK began to reconsider due to COVID-19, which, as Cwerner (2001:21) notes, is understandable since "[i]mmigrants typically face a constant re-examination of their objectives, which are now contingent on external factors." COVID-19 emerged as a dominant external factor shaping the narratives collected in this research, increasing uncertainty among first-generation migrants.

Jin, for example, shared: "I have a concrete plan to stay in the UK for next one to two years." She then noted that she would reassess her situation afterward, echoing Cwerner's (2001) perspective. Similarly, Xiuying, when contemplating her future, highlighted the added complexity of family responsibilities as an only child, making a return to China a distinct possibility:

"I'm not so clear about my future plans, but at least in next 3-4 years probably I will still be here. Many things may change, and I really don't know, I think about everything. I came here for PhD. I thought I won't stay here, but some many things happened in the past year now and because I'm the only child, I don't have any siblings and now I see my parents getting old and I

just feel I can't leave them alone in China anymore. I just started to think I may move back to China in the future. Eventually. I didn't make my mind yet."

Xiuying's reflections resonate with many other participants who came to the UK without a fixed idea of how long they would stay. This situates migrants, at least those in this study, within an emerging category of highly mobile youth. Migration itself, then, can be viewed as "a tactic of creating futures" (Cole, 2010, cited in Griffiths et al., 2013:np). As a result, many migrants prefer to keep their options open, as seen in Mahmoud's case: "My plans are more open, but I can say before COVID my plans were - if I could get a job opportunity I would stay, yeah."

Just as migration to the UK once represented an uncertain yet hopeful future, COVID-19 has amplified uncertainty and shifted perceptions toward a less optimistic outlook. COVID-19 was also the main reason Maria, a twice-migrant who moved from Romania to Spain and later to the UK, started re-evaluating her long-term plans:

"Right now, I feel like I've never really felt like I wanted to stay there forever. And with this COVID situation it's made it even harder to picture yourself living in a country where you don't really know anyone. So, I think the answer would be no – right now I don't see myself living in the UK for the rest of my life, I think it's more of a temporary thing for me."

Griffiths et al. (2013:np) explain that "[i]f migration can be considered a means of imagining or creating futures, about hope and aspiration, then it is also reflective of absent or uncertain futures." Migration research often links future-making to age, with several participants expressing that they feel 'too old' to relocate again or that it is time to establish stability. Aneta, for instance, reflected on this sentiment:

"You see, getting older as well, I feel like I want to put my roots down somewhere. I don't want to travel again and disrupt the whole network I've built in 8 years. I just find it harder to be honest, it was harder and harder to move."

Having previously moved from the Czech Republic to Belgium and then to the UK, Aneta acknowledged that her long-term relationship, strengthened during COVID-19, further solidified her desire for stability. She later shared on social media that she had gotten married, reinforcing this shift in priorities. A similar concern about age was voiced by João, who humorously remarked that he was "too old to be living with housemates." Like-

wise, Lena expressed a desire to live in countries beyond the UK but questioned whether she had enough time to do so:

"Now I want to stay here probably, I was thinking too, I really wanted to figure out how New Zealand looks like or how Canada is. But to be fair in that age, I'm 29 years old now, I'm not sure if I want to start everything from the beginning again in another country and I'm really enjoying myself here in the UK. I'm not sure if I'm staying in London, but I'd like to definitely stay there for a year or something [...] So maybe I can find a job globally to go to live in Canada for a year and then come back. Or stay there for half a year, things like that, so yeah. That's the plan."

Ultimately, these narratives highlight how migration is deeply intertwined with uncertainty, aspiration, and external disruptions. While mobility has traditionally been a way of crafting future possibilities, the added complexity of global crises, family ties, and aging has led many migrants to reassess their long-term plans.

Seeing oneself as too old to pursue an idea or explore life in another country can be understood through the lens of time as a resource, "a commodity that one can have too much or too little of" (Griffiths, 2014:2003). In this sense, migrants with aging parents or those who were only children and felt responsible for their care often perceived themselves as having less time to plan their future. They felt pressured to make decisions sooner rather than later. Eleni reflected on this awareness of time:

"You are just aware of the time. That your parents and your grandparents... and people are leaving and coming and changes are happening, but actually you're outside, you're not included in that. So, every time I go back to Cyprus, I look at my grandfather and I'm like, 'Oh my God,' you know, he's getting older. Am I gonna be able to see him again?"

Similarly, Mariana, whose father had health issues, described feeling that her "time had come":

"A few months ago, I did consider going back home, but not because I didn't feel at ease in the UK, but because I thought, you know, my time had come simply to go back to my family. My family situation is—I mean, for everyone who is in their 30s or 40s, it's just really hard to be away from your parents when you know that they are aging and that now you will run out of time at some point and that you will not get to enjoy those moments with your parents, you know."

Later in the interview, however, Mariana acknowledged that while she would love to return to Spain, the high unemployment rate and complications brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic meant she had no immediate plans to move. Such dilemmas were common among lone working migrants, illustrating a state of postponed temporality. Barbara Adam has written extensively on the significance of imagined futures, describing them as the “not yet” future (Adam, 2010). Although migrants are acutely aware of their parents and even grandparents aging, acting on these concerns remains challenging. Many wait for circumstances to improve or for an external shift to prompt them into making a decision.

‘GOING BACK’... PERMANENTLY?

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the question of ‘going back’ is a recurring theme in every migrant’s life. In the context of first-generation migrants, this research, and my own experience, I was particularly interested in whether my participants had plans to return permanently in the future. In other words, could leaving the UK for their home country be a viable option for them?

As noted in the previous section, while some participants expressed a clear desire to return, this longing often conflicted with the initial motives behind their migration—primarily career prospects. This reflects what Cwerner (2001:12) describes as a paradox “between the migrants’ will to return and the forever delayed return,” which I observed on several occasions during my interviews. This paradox “creates a particular problem and exercises a direct influence on [migrants’] time perspective” (Elchardus et al., 1987:146). Simply put, migrants’ attitudes toward their home country are deeply shaped by their economic and social achievements in the host society, which they cannot easily set aside, no matter how much they may wish to return. The issue of return—whether it is “projected, planned, desired, postponed, or impossible”—therefore plays a fundamental role in migrants’ temporal experience (Cwerner, 2001:12).

For many, career prospects were the primary factor keeping them in the host country. Adrian explained this stance firmly:

“I will never, never consider going back to Greece as an employee. [...] I cannot see myself working in Greece like this. Now, if the conditions change or under different circumstances, I’m open [to the possibility] but I think the percentage [for that happening] is small.”

For Adrian, returning to Greece is more of a retirement plan than an immediate option. Although many participants shared similar views regarding their careers, some had begun contemplating return migration at an earlier stage, as illustrated by Androula:

"It makes me really sad, but at the same time, I know that it's not enough of a reason for me to go back. Like I don't know, if something happened to my parents then maybe I would consider going back or something but thinking about these things, about the future makes me really sad, but I know that I have to be abroad because I still need to sort out my career and what I'm going to do before I even consider going back because there's not very many career options for me."

Migrants are often torn between striving for a better future for themselves and their careers while also feeling a deep responsibility to care for their families and remain physically close to their 'old' lives. This emotional and practical tension creates a constant push and pull, where the desire to support family members from afar can conflict with the necessity of building a stable career abroad. The previously discussed case of Xiuying illustrates the particularly difficult decisions faced by single-child migrants, who often bear the sole responsibility for their aging parents. Lena expressed similar concerns, highlighting how the uncertainty of her family's well-being weighs heavily on her, even as she acknowledges that a premature return is not yet a viable option given the limited career opportunities in her home country.

"I'm just scared of that thing when my parents grow old that I have no brothers or sisters and siblings to take care of them. So, in that case, I will need to be in two places at once, which will be very difficult."

Strong family bonds and a sense of responsibility were recurring themes among participants, reinforcing the findings of previous research. As Baldassar (2011) noted, "[a]mong Italian migrants in Australia, for instance, strong family bonds and the moral obligation to care for ageing parents, understood as part of ethnic and national identity, is the most important reason for embarking on return journeys, even for second-generation migrants" (Marschall, 2017:216).

However, the caring responsibilities described in this work align with previous research on transnational communication between families – that "migrant women contribute to the development and maintenance of transnational families and communities in ways that go beyond the role of

productive labour” (Zontini, 2004:1117). Whilst participants of all genders frequently kept in touch with their family members back home and are in one way or another involved in ‘kin work’, women tend to do more, and feel greater responsibility for providing care from afar. In Eleni’s case, despite recognizing the importance of career development for young people, she admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic shifted her perspective:

“It’s a mixed feeling. Because in my area of work, in Cyprus, things are quite underdeveloped. Therefore, they are still developing my area of work. I work with people with disabilities, autism, and mental health issues. [...] But then I changed my mind when Brexit happened and the COVID has changed that perspective, you know. It made me think about the important things in life. Is it important for me to continue in the UK? [...] It was just a rollercoaster of emotions. It made me think, ‘Okay, now with COVID, what if something happened to my parents? What would I do if my family was not okay?’ And I was just thinking maybe I can develop things in Cyprus, be with my family, which is important for me, and actually contribute to my field of work [there].”

This extract illustrates how the interplay between career development and family care obligations becomes especially acute during times of crisis, prompting migrants to re-evaluate their priorities and consider the possibility of return as they navigate emotional and practical uncertainties. A few months after our interview, when I contacted Eleni for a photograph needed for the photo-elicitation method, she informed me that she had relocated back to Cyprus. Sánchez-Domínguez and Guirola-Abenza (2021:515) have noticed how even though the reconciliation of work and family life has been found to be a challenge for all female workers, female migrants are likely to face specific challenges. They also warn how the burden of care many female migrants carry can oftentimes only be absorbed by terminating their employment in the host-country.

Moreover, for those who embark on a return journey to their home countries, “the memory of immigration becomes the source of their new identities as returned migrants. [...] The memories of immigration are expressed in individual and collective narratives and stories of displacement and adaptation, success and failure, settlement and return” (Cwerner, 2001:25). It is no surprise then, that some migrants still in the UK but contemplating return feel that going back to their home country would also mean going backwards symbolically, as described by Miguel:

"This is a question that, to be honest, is going through my mind all the time, because I feel like, from a realistic point of view, it doesn't have to mean that I'm taking a step back just because I'm going back to Portugal, but I have the feeling that, from my point of view, I guess that I would kind of feel that way."

Connecting this to migration temporalities, "[r]eturn migration extends the linear model of migration to a circular model with an imputed readjustment and assimilation to the country of origin" (Ley and Kobayashi, 2005:112). Given this perspective and their memories of progress since leaving their home country, migrants like Miguel perceive returning permanently as not just a physical move but also a symbolic regression.

PRESSURE TO COME BACK

The pressure to return home often manifests as subtle emotional manipulation. Viktorija described how her mother, in particular, persistently portrays the UK as an undesirable place to live while idealizing their home country as welcoming and familiar. Additionally, as a linguist, Viktorija's mother adds another layer of pressure by emphasizing the importance of 'returning to the roots':

"I've been definitely experiencing actual pressure, like emotional pressure, from my mum. Every once in a while, she'll go... 'Being in Latvia would be so much better. So, so nice. Now, wouldn't it be so nice?' But I'm not there. I'm not going to be there. But you know, that sort of pushes my buttons. I don't think she does it on purpose to upset me, but, yeah, it's a bit tough. [...] I was quite torn about some aspects of staying here, and then obviously there's been all the emotional blackmail from my mum. [...] And I've also chatted with another friend with whom I lived in Edinburgh—she was kind of in a very similar situation, in the sense that we cannot imagine going back there now."

Viktorija also mentioned that she had yet to tell her grandmother that she did not plan to move back to Latvia. Gillespie et al. (2022:118) discuss the relationships between migrants and their families, suggesting that return migrants are often more motivated by family considerations than onward migrants. The authors also highlight how family networks and the pressure they exert evolve over time, influenced by life transitions.

Mahmoud shared how his parents' expectations changed as he stayed abroad longer:

"Before, when I was doing my Master's, they didn't accept it—they wanted me to return. But now, I think because I've stayed here for too long, at a certain point, I'm not returning [back], so I feel they got adapted to the situation."

For some participants, parents initially viewed migration as temporary. However, over time, prolonged separation disrupted family dynamics. Ivana explained how her mother struggled with her continued absence:

"... my mum, she always rambles about why I'm in the UK, and then I tell her that I do not miss Croatia for Croatia—I miss the people. [...] My mum is not happy that I'm in the UK, and I try to explain to her that here, I have a chance to be independent. Basically, everyone accepts the fact that I am in the UK, except my mum. During my undergraduate studies, I was in the capital, so I wasn't home either. Then I spent a semester in Poland, which was a bit bigger step. Then I went to Sheffield to do my Master's, and that was an even bigger step. But I think she never complained before because there was this transition of a few smaller steps, so she never thought it was permanent."

Such experiences are common among young migrants. As Gillespie et al. (2022:119) note, young adults are in a life phase of transitioning to independence, marked by higher education and entry into the labour market. While many participants consider returning home—especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns for elderly parents—economic conditions in their home countries often prevent them from doing so. Research has found that when return migration does occur, it is often driven by non-economic factors rather than employment opportunities (Gillespie et al., 2022:121).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Whether through short video calls with friends and family or visits to their home country, the participants of this research maintain constant connections with 'back home.' Transnational practices are deeply embedded in their daily lives, shaping their experiences of migration while residing in the UK. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted their ability to live transnationally and maintain active ties in both countries. Travel restrictions forced members of transnational communities to

rearrange their plans, whether it involved visiting their home country or returning to the UK, depending on where they were when the restrictions were introduced.

According to Povrzanović Frykman (2010:45), for those who have not migrated, such as the friends and family of migrants, visits reaffirm cultural norms and influence familial and social relationships. With limited opportunities to travel back and forth, many migrants began questioning their move to the UK and reassessing whether their responsibilities toward family and loved ones should take precedence over career aspirations.

This paper explores how migrants in the UK perceive time and, more specifically, their future, examining the role of frequent home visits, transnational practices, and increased caregiving responsibilities. For first-generation migrants, the future often feels distant, abstract and highly uncertain. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened this uncertainty, making long-term plans even more fragile and, in some cases, introducing the idea of return migration for the first time. During interviews, participants frequently framed their experiences in terms of "before the pandemic" and "due to the COVID situation," highlighting how profoundly the crisis affected their outlook. The pandemic has blurred their vision of the future, prompting them to reevaluate their priorities, including the permanence of their stay in the UK. While many have considered the possibility of return migration, for most, it remains a postponed or uncertain decision—something to be addressed at a later, undefined time.

A key finding of this research is the significant care and responsibility many young migrants feel toward their parents and family members 'back home.' These responsibilities often involve managing emotional support, coordinating practical care from afar, and navigating complex feelings of guilt or obligation intensified by the pandemic's travel restrictions. For some, caregiving shaped their decisions about mobility and futures as much as, or even more than, career ambitions. Participants described moments of tension between their desire to pursue opportunities in the UK and the pressing need to provide care and be physically present for aging or ill parents. This dual responsibility creates volatile and uncertain futures, marked by difficult trade-offs and constant negotiations of where "home" is.

Ultimately, this research underscores the tension between career aspirations and familial responsibilities among young migrants. While migrants may aspire to return home, practical and emotional considerations, especially caregiving duties, often delay or complicate their decisions. Future research should explore how these migration patterns evolve post-pandemic, particularly regarding long-term settlements and transnational caregiving practices.

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Odlazak, dolazak i „povratak“: kako obveze skrbi stvaraju neizvjesne budućnosti migranata

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SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad istražuje kako su planovi mladih migranata o budućnosti u Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu bili destabilizirani pojavom pandemije bolesti COVID-19. Neizvjesnost vezana uz zdravlje, zaposlenje i, ponajprije, dobrobit članova obitelji u zemljama podrijetla potaknula je mnoge na preispitivanje povratne migracije ili mogućnosti preseljenja rodbine u Ujedinjeno Kraljevstvo – pitanja koja su ranije bila u drugom planu. Iako se istraživanja migracija često usmjeravaju na individualnu agenciju, ovo istraživanje pokazuje kako obiteljske obveze i promjenjivi vanjski uvjeti preoblikuju migrantske putanje i prioritete. Ponavljajuća tema jest paradoks želje za povratkom koji se neprestano odgađa zbog strukturnih i emocionalnih ograničenja. Migranti su se našli rastrgani između osiguravanja stabilne budućnosti u inozemstvu i ispunjavanja obveza skrbi – financijske, praktične i emocionalne – prema voljenima kod kuće. Na temelju internetskih intervju s 27 mladih i visokoobrazovanih migranata, provedenih između prosinca 2020. i rujna 2021., rad ističe kako krize poput COVID-19 preusmjeravaju odluke o migraciji. Rad pridonosi raspravama o povratnoj migraciji i transnacionalnoj skrbi stavljajući u prvi plan vremensku dimenziju i migrantske predodžbe budućnosti, pokazujući kako budućnost, koja se prije činila dalekom, postaje neposredna i hitna briga, čime se preoblikuje značenje pripadanja i doma.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: migracije, COVID-19, transnacionalna obitelj, mobilnost mladih