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# SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

*Understanding how and why people migrate helps us to see beyond stereotypes and helps move the narrative beyond the deficit model. People don't just move for economic reasons (although that is a very important factor) they also move for issues related to the development of their lifestyle mobilities*



*What is important is the role of imagination in the decision to migrate. Migration could be about escape: escape from somewhere and something, while simultaneously an escape to self-fulfilment and a new life – a recreation, restoration or rediscovery of oneself, of personal potential or of one's 'true' desires*

This article reports on Bulgarian students and migrants' ambivalences towards staying or leaving the UK and the North East of England and discusses how these are the product of a shift from labour mobilities towards lifestyle mobilities.

#### Understanding migration

Nowadays 'more people are on the move, in search of work, education, love, peace, and home' (Larsen *et al.*, 2007, p.245). This may be, as some suggest, because migration is 'a route to a better and more fulfilling way of life, especially in contrast to the one left behind' (O'Reilly & Benson, 2009, p.1). What is important is the role of imagination in the decision to migrate. Migration could be about escape: escape from somewhere and something, while simultaneously an escape to self-fulfilment and a new life – a recreation, restoration or rediscovery of oneself, of personal potential or of one's 'true' desires. Significantly O'Reilly and Benson (2009, p.5) further argue that 'migration is thus aspirational, not only in the sense of what it holds in store for you, but also in terms of what you can become'.

This article reports on some of the key findings of my doctoral work. The overall aim of my research was to critically examine the work, leisure and tourism experiences of Bulgarian migrants and students in the North East of England. I am Bulgarian by nationality so, in examining Bulgarians who migrate to the UK, I have a unique insight as I have both been a student and a migrant and have faced many of the same experiences, challenges and ambivalences. Therefore, my participants and I shared an historical, social and contextual understanding of life in Bulgaria and life in the North East of England. In doing this research I collected extensive empirical evidence gathered using a range of qualitative methods – including focus groups, semi-structured interviews, auto-ethnography and netnography in order to provide evidence that would address the aim of the research as well as the key objectives outlined next.

The aim of the research was addressed in terms of the development of the overall central argument, namely that Bulgarian students and migrants are highly ambivalent about their opportunities in the North East of England. It has been argued that this ambivalence can be understood as a reconceptualisation of the key idea of lifestyle mobilities in terms of the blurring of work, leisure and tourism experiences. Recent studies have highlighted the complex ambivalences of many migrants in different parts of the world in terms of their decision-making and reasoning for both migrating in the first place and for their returning home (Eimermann, 2014). A key aspect of migrants' ambivalence is related to the strength of their pre-migration kinship, friendship and community ties (Ni Laoire, 2007). Post-migration ambivalences imply a dissonance between post-migration experiences with pre-migration hopes and dreams (O'Reilly & Benson, 2009). Some migrants reproduce rather than solve pre-migration concerns which then become important for their post-migration identities (Benson, 2010).

Tazreiter (2019) reports that the notion of ambivalence is developed through the experiences and barriers that migrants face and underpinned by 'emotions, feelings, and attenuations in response to the risks and uncertainties of life' (p.106). Other authors, like Hague (2016), consider ambivalence in relation to hope, which gives it a future-oriented element. At times when migrants might feel uncertain, they can still remain hopeful for the upcoming future. That is why 'being "caught up" in ambivalent feelings and positions does not necessarily mean having a pessimistic view of the future' (Palmer, 2019, p.87).

My research discusses the extent that place-based ambivalences of Bulgarian students and migrants might lead to either a weakening or a strengthening of social relations both before and after moving to the UK and in further mobilities in terms of return travel and travel elsewhere. The research also looks at how and why people migrate – not just for economic reasons but also for issues related to the development of their lifestyle mobilities. The key objectives of this research were:

- 1) To critically examine the experiences of employability of Bulgarian migrants and students in the North East of England.
- 2) To critically examine the leisure and tourism experiences of Bulgarian migrants and students in the North East of England.
- 3) To critically examine whether these experiences lead to greater connections with the host region, a tendency to return home or ambivalences.



### Should I stay or should I go?

The ambivalences of staying or going are fractured by different mobility factors, namely, lifestyles, travel aspirations and work. O'Reilly and Benson (2009, p.1) have reconceptualised labour mobilities as lifestyle mobilities – that is, as a 'route to a better and more fulfilling way of life, especially in contrast to the one left behind'. They also claim that the new way of life could be different from the one searched for by other migrants, such as refugees or asylum-seekers. Lifestyle mobilities are thus seen as an escapist project, searching for 'the good life'. With relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either temporarily or permanently to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life. Central to this analysis is the development of an understanding of pre-migration experiences, particularly regarding work and initial perceptions of what life might be like after migration.

Bulgarian students and migrants tend not to be affluent migrants, but they are still in search of a good life and something that is perceived to be better than their home environment. Cohen *et al.* (2015) have emphasised that the personal stories of individual migrants in the pursuit of 'the good life' need to be contextualised within wider sociological structures, for example, governmental regulations and the example of Bulgarian students and migrants provides a rich depiction of this in the context of ever-changing UK regulations governing work and employment practices. Cohen *et al.* (2015, p.156) emphasise 'voluntary on-going mobile lifestyles' that blur the boundaries between travel, leisure and migration that destabilise the dichotomies of 'home' and 'away'. The concept of lifestyle mobilities is conventionally understood in terms of an entrepreneurial effort to maintain a mobile lifestyle while working either self-employed or in an industry temporarily in order to fund a different lifestyle (Cohen *et al.*, 2015). 'Lifestyle mobility differs from temporary mobility in that it is sustained as an ongoing fluid process, carrying on as everyday practice over time' (Cohen *et al.*, 2015, p.158). Moreover, unlike permanent migration, lifestyle mobilities do not pre-suppose that there is any intention to stay or return, as the movement is on-going and a return to any identified 'origin' cannot be presumed.



### The harsh reality

The reality of working in the North East of England did not go smoothly for the majority of my respondents, and it didn't go smoothly for me either. The problems faced in terms of obtaining permission to work in the UK through the Worker Registration Scheme, as well as numerous negative media campaigns about Bulgarians 'taking' locals jobs, constrained opportunities to work for many Bulgarians. Nevertheless, some respondents found work in the tourism and hospitality industries which, despite their relatively harsh working conditions, allowed a degree of flexibility and 'mobility power' to be held.

Work was usually found through the use of informal contacts rather than through formal agencies, reflecting the difficulties experienced in finding work. As an illustration of the complexity of mobilities, I found that some respondents returned to Bulgaria to gain work experience prior to returning to the UK, whilst for others the lack of employment meant that they would have to return after completion of their studies. Respondents tended to emphasise that the North East of England was not a desired destination but an *ad hoc* destination, a means to an end – namely London. The attraction to the North East was more economic than cultural, in terms of cheaper living and study costs – using this platform to develop new connections to London and elsewhere. In terms of their future work and study plans, the respondents ultimately recognised the draw of London as a place to find work, but many of those that went did not find the lifestyle or the cost of living in London to their liking and returned to Bulgaria or moved elsewhere in Europe, thus using the UK as a 'stepping stone' to future work and travel.



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#### **Lifestyle mobilities**

The concept of lifestyle mobilities may involve multiple ‘homes’, ‘belongings’ and sustained mobility throughout one’s life course and unlike permanent migration, lifestyle mobilities do not pre-suppose that migration is a fixed state. However, the example of Bulgarian migrants and students emphasises ambivalence towards mobilities. Some wished to return because of their negative experiences in the UK while others used their experience to develop new mobilities. The return to Bulgaria was emotionally contested. The Bulgarian identity is frequently reinforced through specific leisure practices and specific community connections. Although it has been argued that contemporary technologies allow the temporal and spatial aspects of home and away to disintegrate and to afford a multiplicity of new connections (Hannam *et al.*, 2014), contemporary Bulgarians tend to use these technologies to maintain connections with their homes in Bulgaria to the extent that they frequently wish to return to re-settle in Bulgaria or at the very least return frequently.

Nevertheless, the concept of lifestyle mobilities is about escape from somewhere and something – simultaneously an escape to self-fulfilment and a new life in terms of what you may become, and is thus aspirational (O’Reilly & Benson, 2009) and this strongly concurs with both my respondents and my own participation in this migration journey. The tension between reality and imagination in terms of Bulgarian students and migrants’ lives is however played out against a wider backdrop of local and international mobilities and migration.

#### **Ambivalent lifestyle mobilities**

The ambivalences of Bulgarian lifestyle mobilities were found to have been developed through specific leisure and tourism practices. In particular, I observed how Bulgarians made connections with cultural and heritage tourism sites that were significant in terms of how they remembered home. I then examined the ways in which Bulgarian’s engaged with various everyday sport and leisure activities and how this had enabled some to become more embedded within the North East of England as honorary ‘Bulgarian Mackems’. However, for Bulgarian migrants, other lifestyle identifiers, such as having children, were significant in terms of the setting of serious priorities and this reinforced a sense of Bulgarian identity as well as class distinction. Bulgarian students, meanwhile, socialised as Bulgarians by forming Bulgarian societies at their universities and sought to distinguish themselves from the British drinking cultures.

In examining the complexity of contemporary mobilities in terms of the ambivalences felt by many students and migrants ‘on the move’ and their need to be flexible in order to develop their own mobility power and control over their own lifestyle mobilities, my research identified key concepts that help us understand migration in a wider sense. Firstly, the example of Bulgarian students and migrants demonstrates a different aspect of lifestyle mobilities, something that might help us to reconceptualise how the concept of lifestyle mobilities can be understood. Bulgarians are, on the whole, not affluent migrants, but they are in search of ‘the good life’ and something better than their home environment. Bulgarian students and migrants continually contest their lifestyle mobilities by retaining aspects of their identities and connections with Bulgaria. Moreover, their mobilities are shaped by places as they compare the qualities of different places.



## Conclusion

The example of Bulgarian migrants and students emphasises ambivalence towards both economic and lifestyle mobilities such that we need to understand lifestyle mobilities as incorporating economic aspects of labour mobility. Moreover, the notion of ambivalence has been developed in the research as a central aspect of lifestyle mobilities thus reconceptualising it as an ongoing process of lifestyle change: should I stay or should I go?

It has also been noted that there is a considerable lack of research on the leisure and tourism practices of migrants, especially non-elite migrants (Vathi, 2015). The wider literature on the relations between tourism and migration (Williams & Hall, 2000) has focused largely on tourists that become migrants in terms of lifestyle mobilities. My research puts this the other way around and focuses on the tourism practices of migrants (and students) and how these practices are also central to the way in which they may become more embedded within a host culture.

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## About the author

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## Keywords

Lifestyle migration, Leisure experiences, Ambivalence, Mobility