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Gentrifying the Rural? Planning and Market Processes in Rural Ireland

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ABSTRACT *Rural gentrification represents an emerging research agenda in the context of social transformation of rural localities. Having as a case study the Republic of Ireland, which provides a case of a laissez-faire planning system, this paper first addresses supply-side factors that have provided key preconditions for gentrification to take place. Then, using survey data in case study localities, we examine the extent that gentrification is a factor in rural residential mobility. We argue that the changing rural condition of Ireland provides essential preconditions for gentrification to take place. However, the gentrification literature provides only a partial angle of rural residential mobility, given the nature of rural in-migration observed in our case studies (that is blue-collar and return rural in-migration) during a period of substantial rural housing growth.*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, much of rural Europe has witnessed unprecedented changes and ruptures to local economies, demands for rural space, spatial mobilities and rural politics, leading to a dramatic reconstitution of rural populations and the formation of a new set of rural social geographies (Marsden, 2009; Bell & Osti, 2010). For example, many rural places have experienced profound changes to housing and land markets (Smith, 2007a) with a growing desire for rural living and an extended spatial mobility that is leading to increased competition for rural resource use. While accounts of rural population change for much of the last century were concerned with rural to urban movements and rural depopulation, over the last 30 years, the dominant narrative has shifted towards processes of rural in-migration and counterurbanization (Champion, 1998; Milbourne, 2007), including amenity-based migration, retiring to the countryside, second homes and international migration. In this paper, we seek to explore one dimension of this reconfiguration of rural space by examining residential mobilities through the lens of gentrification debates.

Gentrification processes, referring to the transformation of an area into a middle-class space, have most commonly been studied in urban contexts; however, increasingly,

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authors have broadened the geography of gentrification studies to include gentrification processes within suburban (Butler, 2007a) and rural localities (Stockdale, 2010). From a planning perspective, rural gentrification, along with counterurbanization, has increasingly become a key policy narrative within the rural planning arena, in particular informing planning policies formulated to mitigate the impacts of gentrification and displacement through 'local needs' approaches to allocating land for housing, or discrimination towards locals in approving planning permissions for new-build in rural areas. However, accounts of rural gentrification tend to be primarily UK focused where for the past 60 years macro-level planning policies have concentrated most new development within urban areas (Owen & Herlin, 2009), leading to restrictive housing supply within rural localities. As noted by Gallent (2009), the UK and particularly England's experience differs from that of other countries owing to the strength of national feeling in favour of protecting the rural resource; in marked contrast there is currently a dearth of literature examining potential rural gentrification processes in other European (EU) contexts with less restrictive planning policies towards accommodating new housing development in rural areas.

This paper explores the overlaps between gentrification theory and rural residential mobility in case study localities in rural Ireland where planning practice has tended to facilitate new housing development in the countryside. The paper first addresses supply-side factors that have provided key preconditions for gentrification to take place within rural localities. Then, using survey data in three case study areas in the counties of Kildare, South Tipperary and Clare, we examine the extent that gentrification is a factor in rural residential mobility by identifying potential gentrifiers and exploring the consumer preferences and lifestyle choices underpinning rural mobility. The paper concludes by developing wider insights into the study of rural mobility and planning practice. However, first the discussion is located within an overview of gentrification debates.

Gentrification and the Rural Dimension

While early accounts of gentrification were largely associated with distinctive landscapes of urban renovation and renaissance (Davidson & Lees, 2005), as gentrification matures, both as a concept and as a process, new spaces of gentrification have emerged, both globally and down the urban hierarchy (Lees *et al.*, 2010). Smith (2002), for example, argues that gentrification is not only apparent in a range of spatial scales, but also manifests at a range of locations — suburban, rural, inner urban and retirement hotspots such as coastal resorts. Within this context, there is an emerging literature surrounding gentrification processes within rural localities (Darling, 2005; Nelson *et al.*, 2010; Stockdale, 2010). As the geography of gentrification processes becomes extended, Davidson and Lees (2005) suggest three key elements of gentrification that is not attached to a specific landscape or context: (1) social upgrading of a locale by incoming high-income groups; (2) direct displacement of low-income groups; and (3) reinvestment of capital. We consider each of these in turn in relation to the rural context.

The first feature of gentrification is the social transformation of an area involving the middle classes, leading to social upgrading of a locale by incoming groups often involving a shift in lifestyle preferences among young, educated and affluent households. For some theorists, this shift in lifestyle and residential preferences provides the basis for a *demand-side* approach to conceptualizing gentrification as essentially a population movement

(Ley, 1987) based on the consumption of space as a part of self or class identity (Skeggs, 2004). For Butler (2007b) and other consumption-side theorists, key questions in explaining gentrification revolve around class constitution and identity, such as: who are the gentrifiers? Where do they come from? And what draws them to live in particular localities? Within a rural context, demand-side studies, focusing on consumer preferences, have highlighted the importance of middle class representations of rurality in underpinning consumption practices. For Smith and Phillips (2001), the acquisition of symbolic capital bound up with notions of 'place' in the countryside has proved very alluring for the new middle classes in pursuit of identity, belonging and status. This consumption of 'nature' and green space has further led Smith and Phillips to term rural gentrification as 'greentrification'.

The second feature of gentrification identified by Davidson and Lees (2005) is the association between middle class population movements and the often contested displacement of former residents and low-income groups. Issues of displacement have been subject to much debate, with critical analyses of gentrification placing displacement and class conflict as central in understanding change processes (Atkinson, 2000). While Slater (2006) suggests that gentrification always leads to displacement of lower income groups, Hamnett (2009) argues that the notion that gentrification equals displacement has been uncritically accepted as the conventional wisdom. Although Hamnett recognizes that rapid house price inflation can and does effectively price out low-income groups, this is not the same as direct or forced displacement as is often assumed. Rather Hamnett notes that working class populations have been in a long-term process of decline as a result of structural changes in industrial and occupational class structure which have generated growth in the size of the middle classes: 'as one class has grown and the other shrunk it can be argued that what we have seen is a process of class replacement, rather than class displacement, though I do not dispute that this has also occurred' (477). Again these themes have been addressed within the rural studies literature, with studies exploring shifts in the class structure of rural areas, often focusing on the 'colonisation' of the countryside by an exurban or suburban, middle class of homeowners who seek to create a lifestyle organized around the consumption of nature and rurality, and the subsequent displacement of longer term residents (Darling, 2005).

A third defining characteristic of gentrification is the refurbishment of properties linked to processes of disinvestment and investment in localities. For some theorists, notably Smith (1979), this is linked to a *supply-side* explanation of gentrification processes. For Smith (1979), a focus on consumption patterns provides only a partial explanation of gentrification processes as

the gentrifier as consumer is only one of the many actors participating in the process. To explain gentrification according to the gentrifier's actions alone, while ignoring the role of builders, developers, landlords, mortgage lenders, government agencies, real estate agents and tenants, is excessively narrow. (540)

In relation to rural localities, Darling (2005) applies Neil Smith's rent-gap theory to up-state New York, while Phillips (2004) locates supply-side explanations within the context of rural restructuring and in particular the shift from an agricultural-based economy towards notions of a post-productivist countryside. Phillips finds parallels within post-productivist debates and urban gentrification literature, particularly in relation

to the devalorization of land and buildings with respect to agricultural capital and its revalorization with respect to other capital networks. For Phillips, this suggests that rural gentrification might therefore be seen as one form of the revalorization of resources and spaces that have become unproductive or marginal to agrarian capital and indeed other forms of rural capital. In this context, Phillips (2002) suggests that rural gentrification may take the form of conversion/renovation of farm buildings and other rural properties, but may also include rural new-build as this may be associated with prior disinvestment from agriculture (as land coverts from agricultural to residential use).

From a planning perspective, accounts of rural gentrification have been dominated by issues surrounding housing affordability and the resulting displacement of longer term residents from gentrifying localities, and the impacts on achieving 'balanced' rural communities. Displacement concerns may be heightened by local planning policies which (at least in a UK context) tend to focus on the issue of restricting housing supply in rural areas on environmental and landscape grounds (Gallent & Tewdwr-Jones, 2007). In many parts of the UK and in particular England, the dual pressure of restrictive housing supply and the effects of rural in-migration, have resulted in acute affordability issues for local communities (Best & Shucksmith, 2006). In this case, supply has tended to be outstripped by increased demand from commuters, retirees, second-home owners, and those buying properties as holiday homes (Shucksmith, 1981, 1990; Gallent & Tewdwr-Jones, 2007). Those purchasing properties for these purposes tend to be in-migrants to the area, with greater buying power, who can out-bid local residents, resulting in rises in house prices beyond the reach of locals (Stockdale *et al.*, 2000; Gallent & Tewdwr-Jones, 2007). Therefore, planning regulation may act as an agent of gentrification in rural areas through restricting the supply of new houses. In this context, planning and housing policies in rural areas have emerged to mitigate the impacts of gentrification and displacement. For example, common policy responses may include affordable rural housing schemes (Satsangi & Dunmore, 2003), tax disincentives for second-home owners (Gallent *et al.*, 2005), and planning policy to accommodate local needs only (Satsangi *et al.*, 2010). However, these issues may be less pronounced in countries with more relaxed controls on house-building in rural areas such as in Ireland and within southern EU states.

For many years, studies of gentrification have tended to focus on *either* demand- or supply-side explanations (Stockdale, 2010), however, increasingly there has been greater recognition given to the complementarity of demand- and supply-side theories (Hamnett, 1991; Lees, 1994). For example, Hamnett (1991) suggests that production-side theories (such as the rent gap theory) may provide an explanation for the conditions that may be necessary for gentrification to occur, but it does not necessitate that gentrification will take place, and therefore does not occur independently of gentrifiers. Thus, for gentrification to take place, first it is necessary to have a supply of available property and land (resulting from previous disinvestment) and second, there has to be some effective demand from potential gentrifiers arising from the availability of finance or a cultural preference to live in specific localities (which in turn is influenced by changes in the labour market and demographic and lifestyle changes).

In this paper, we seek to enhance understanding of rural gentrification by focusing on three key aspects. First, we hope to add insights to rural gentrification by providing a contrasting example to UK case studies which dominate the literature. The Irish case explored in this paper provides an interesting counterbalance to the UK literature given the more relaxed attitude to accommodating new housing development in rural areas, which may

suggest that the potential for displacement from in-migration is lessened. To examine these issues, we explore supply-side factors that may provide a frame for gentrification processes. Second, we aim to identify the extent that gentrification is occurring by identifying recent movers in three rural localities and third, we explore consumptive practices among recent movers. Thus, in this paper, we respond to the call for more integrative studies by drawing on both demand-side and supply-side factors in discussing rural gentrification in Ireland. However, we conclude by arguing that gentrification theory is only partially revealing in understanding rural social transformation in Ireland, characterized by a mosaic of mobilities including both 'white-collar' and 'blue-collar' in-migration, and significant return migration movements. These findings are important for planning policy, as simplistic understandings of gentrification, counterurbanization and rural mobilities can lead to the adoption of a confusing suite of policy measures designed to mitigate displacement and to create a socially inclusive countryside.

Rural Mobility in Ireland: Supply-Side Factors

Rural Ireland has witnessed vast changes over the course of the so-called Celtic Tiger and post-Tiger eras (for a detailed assessment, see McDonagh, 2002; Walsh, 2007). In this study, our particular interest has been the demographic recovery of many rural areas following over a century of haemorrhaging population to out-migration and emigration. Until recently, the overriding historical pattern of population change in Ireland has been one of sustained emigration, resulting in rural areas characterized by higher rates of economically dependent population groups, gender imbalances, a loss in ability to create new employment opportunities leading to weakened rural communities (Haase, 2009). However, population growth has been experienced over recent decades and between 2002 and 2006, Ireland witnessed a population increase of 8% and the highest recorded population since 1871. Since the mid-1990s, Ireland has experienced high levels of net in-migration and the expansion of population growth from the larger urban centres into smaller towns, and indeed into the open countryside (Walsh *et al.*, 2007a). According to the last Census in 2006, 40% of the State's population live in rural areas, defined as living in settlements of 1500 people or less. While this percent age share of the overall population is declining, in absolute numbers the rural population is growing while accessible rural areas within commuting distances of major urban centres have seen some of the highest population increases in Ireland over the last decade (Gkartzios & Scott, 2010).

Perhaps one of the most characteristic features of Irish rural areas is the distinctive dispersed settlement pattern. Approximately 70% of the rural population live in single, dispersed houses built in the open countryside (that is outside of towns and villages) (Keaveney & Walsh, 2005), often referred to as 'one-off' houses. Over the last decade, Ireland has experienced an unprecedented boom in house-building with an approximately 200% increase in house completions between 1994 and 2004 (Scott *et al.*, 2007). Within this context, over one quarter of the housing units built between 1991 and 2002 were detached dwellings in the open countryside (Walsh *et al.*, 2007b). Similarly, over the last decade, rural towns and villages within commuting distance of larger urban centres have also witnessed a rapid expansion of house-building activity (Meredith, 2007). A second distinctive feature of housing in rural Ireland is the overwhelming dominance of home ownership over other tenures (Finnerty *et al.*, 2003). Nationally, home ownership accounts for almost 80% of dwellings in Ireland, with private renting accounting for



Figure 1. Example of newly built rural dwelling.

approximately 11% and the remainder comprising social and public housing. However, Finnerty *et al.* note that in rural Ireland, there is an almost exclusive attachment to home ownership, with few rental (private or public) options, resulting in a vulnerability of rural dwellers to rises in property prices and possible displacement from local housing markets. Rural areas have also witnessed a rapid expansion of second/holiday home ownership (see, for example, Norris & Winston, 2009).

With limited appetite for refurbishing existing properties or disused agricultural buildings for residential purposes, the supply of rural housing and the recent population growth in many rural areas has almost exclusively been accommodated by new-build properties. Traditionally, the rural housing supply system has tended to operate on a 'self-build' basis: that is houses that are not ready-built by a speculative builder or bought on the second-hand market (Clapham *et al.*, 1993). Often this process takes place whereby an owner-occupier would gain access to a site for a single rural house, often through the open market but also more often from a family relation (usually a farmer), and develop the property through the investment of 'sweat equity' and inhabit it after completion. However, with the influx of new rural residents, housing supply processes are now more diverse and characterized by spatial variations, aided by historically low mortgage interest rates, and include:

- Self-build of single rural dwellings by non-locals, with sites purchased on the open market or through direct negotiation with land-owner/farmer, often in competition with local residents. Historically, single rural dwellings tended to be concentrated in peripheral rural areas; however, analysis by Keaveney (2007) suggests that since the 1990s, the construction of single rural areas has become more concentrated in peri-urban or accessible rural areas and within scenic coastal locations. Moreover, as Keaveney notes, somewhat ironically, while average family size has fallen significantly in recent years, the size of new rural housing units is increasing. Although houses with

five rooms account for the largest proportion of rural dwellings in 2002 at over a quarter of all housing stock, the number of dwellings with eight rooms or more had the strongest growth over the period 1991 to 2002, accounting for under a third of all new rural dwellings (see Figures 1 and 2 for typical examples);

- Developer-led speculative housing developments, generally small-scale, suburban-style housing estates in rural towns and villages or a small cluster of houses in the open countryside. For example, towns with a population of 5000–9999 people witnessed a 24.2% increase in population between 1996 and 2002 and towns of 1500–2999 people saw a 19% increase over the same period (Scott *et al.*, 2005). The greatest concentration of these developments has taken place in the extended commuter belts of the primary urban centres, particularly in counties in the outer commuter belt of Dublin (McCarthy *et al.*, 2003; NES, 2004). Research by Mahon (2007) suggests that, although residential development in these fringe locations is often driven by nearby urban centres, the representation of rurality is central in the conceptualization of place by home-owners, who largely interpret and experience fringe areas as broadly rural places (see Figure 3 for a typical example);
- Developer-led speculative apartment developments in rural locations, urban style apartments involving both new-build and (less commonly) through the conversion of former industrial buildings into apartments (see Figures 4 and 5 for examples). Again, these are now commonplace in the extended commuter belts and in remote and scenic areas marketed as second/holiday homes.

In the following section, we focus on the consumer preferences and lifestyle choices underpinning rural housing development by examining the extent that this penchant for rural living can be explained by gentrification processes by identifying potential gentrifiers and examining their residential preferences. However, first, the remainder of this section



Figure 2. Example of newly built rural dwelling.



Figure 3. Example of suburban style housing development in a rural village.



Figure 4. Mill located in a rural village converted to apartments.

will discuss the supply-side factors which have provided the necessary conditions for rural gentrification to take place.

Supply-side explanations of gentrification emphasize that disinvestment in an area is a necessary precondition underpinning neighbourhood recycling and gentrification processes. In an urban context, this is usually in the form of industrial decline (and the resultant availability of industrial property for residential conversion) or falling rents in a



Figure 5. Newly constructed apartments in a rural village.

neighbourhood. However, as Phillips (2004) argues, similar conditions can be found in rural contexts as a result of the continued restructuring of the agricultural sector. Within a EU context, agriculture is no longer the backbone of rural economies. Although it still has an important role in shaping rural landscapes in many advanced capitalist societies, its weight in rural economies is often low and declining; in the 25 EU countries, 96% of rural land use is agricultural (including forestry), but only 13% of rural employment is in agriculture, producing only 6% of gross value added in rural regions (OECD, 2006). Within Ireland, although agriculture has traditionally played an important role in the national economy, in many rural areas farming is in decline and structurally weak. For example, in 1991, there were almost 170,600 farms in Ireland, but by 2000 numbers had fallen by 17% to just over 141,500 farms (Crowley *et al.*, 2008). Although this change represents, in part, a process of farm consolidation as smaller holdings become subsumed into larger units, the disinvestment from agriculture has also resulted from increased competition for rural land for non-farming uses. In particular, the recent housing boom during the mid-1990s to mid-2000s fuelled sharp increases in land values for housing, with rapid increases in land prices even in more peripheral areas less affected by surges in demand close to the main urban centres (Williams *et al.*, 2010). While farm incomes have been decreasing, for some farmers the selling of sites or small parcels of land for new housing can prove a useful source of additional income (Finnerty *et al.*, 2003). Additionally, farmers' organizations have fiercely defended farmers' private property rights, including vocally campaigning for relaxed planning controls for new housing in the open countryside (Scott, 2008).

Second, and related, has been the availability of capital to finance new housing development; an issue increasingly revealed by the recent bursting of the property bubble in Ireland. This includes historically low mortgage interest rates encouraging home ownership, and increased disposable income which has driven the second-home markets. Moreover, a combination of low-interest rates and less than robust banking practices has also

fuelled speculative, developer-led housing developments in rural locations. This has increasingly been exposed during the current recession and the collapse of both property prices and banking institutions across the State. For example, a new State body, the National Assets Management Agency has been established to prevent a significant downward price correction by acquiring bank loans to now bankrupt developers. The crisis has also revealed that speculative house-building has led to an oversupply of houses throughout Ireland, with a recent estimate of almost 300,000 vacant dwellings leading to the emergence of, as termed in the media, 'ghost estates' of housing developments which are now unfinished as developers face bankruptcy. Clearly, for both self-build owner-occupiers and small-scale developers operating in rural locations, the availability of finance over the last decade has provided a key driver for residential mobility and investment in rural localities, facilitating increasingly affluent householders to exercise their locational choices in a free market.

Third has been the role of the state in both controlling and encouraging housing development within rural localities. New housing development in the Irish countryside is controlled by a statutory land-use planning system requiring planning permission for all new development. Traditionally, within rural areas, the planning system has been facilitative of new development, reflecting historically high levels of out-migration and a lack of development pressures. Indeed, the scar of past rural depopulation has ingrained into a local political culture an ethos of celebrating physical development in the countryside as a visible indicator of community health. This standpoint has led to the operation of a lax rural planning system (Duffy, 2000; Gallent *et al.*, 2003) which has facilitated the growth of dispersed dwellings in the open countryside (McGrath, 1998). This rural planning regime has been reinforced by a local political culture characterized by clientelism, whereby locally elected representatives lobby for individual applicants for planning permission as a form of servicing of constituents (or potential constituents) that politicians must heavily invest in if they are to hold their seats (Curtin & Varley, 2002).

However, in more recent years, the issue of housing development in rural areas has emerged as a contentious environmental issue, with environmental and heritage groups campaigning for more restrictive controls on new development as a result of rapid house-building and population growth. With the prospect of new planning legislation and national planning policy initiatives in the early 2000s, rural-based lobby groups vocally campaigned for the continuation of relaxed controls on rural house-building, based partly on a desire to accommodate local housing needs within rural localities but also to protect the ability of landowners to sell sites for housing development. In 2005, the Irish government published national *Planning Guidelines for Sustainable Rural Housing* (DEHLG, 2005), following extensive lobbying from a range of pro-rural stakeholders and locally elected representatives in rural areas, which provide an assumption in favour of accommodating new housing development in rural areas. This facilitative attitude towards accommodating new rural housing development provides an important frame for gentrification processes characterized by both self-build and speculative developer-led development. For example, the relaxed approach to new development has enabled affluent households to act on a preference for rural living through a self-build house relatively unconstrained (in a EU context), while developers have benefitted from a pro-development planning regime in rural locations.

The state can be seen as an active agent promoting rural gentrification, through housing policies targeting rural areas. For example, in an effort to tackle rural depopulation and stir

development in a rural region in the north-west of the country, in the late 1990s, the Irish government introduced a rural regeneration tax incentive scheme, known as the Rural Renewal Scheme (RRS). The scheme aimed at bringing new residents into the declining rural area by sponsoring new development, both residential and commercial, through tax relief. It allowed the construction or refurbishment costs of business premises or dwellings for owner-occupation or rent in the designated rural area to be off-set against income or business tax, following the experience of previous urban regeneration schemes within Dublin city and other dilapidated urban areas across Ireland (see also McGreal *et al.*, 2002; Williams, 2006). The RRS, which reflects favourable policy attitudes towards housing development in Irish rural areas discussed earlier in the paper, cost an average €90.6 million per year between 1999 and 2004, which is quite significant compared to public spending for other area-based rural development programmes in the country and subsidized in total 1876 developments by the end of 2004, 79% of which were newly built residential developments (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2005). The scheme was successful in stimulating population and housing growth in the designated areas, inevitably attracting some new, affluent residents. Notably, the designated areas increased their population by almost 10% between 2002 and 2006 (compared to 8% nationally), while people with third-level education residing in these areas increased by 43% during the same period (compared to 27% nationally) (Gkartzios & Norris, 2011). Census data also reveal that the districts designated under the RRS increased their share of white-collar workers (all professional and non-manual workers) as part of the labour force from 33% in 2002 to 37% in 2006, while the proportion of white-collar workers increased nationally from 45% to 47% during the same period (CSO, 2006).

On the other hand, the scheme also resulted in the oversupply of housing, which in turn has contributed to high rates of vacant houses in the area and has raised questions about the appropriateness of property-led regeneration in rural areas in Ireland and internationally (Gkartzios & Norris, 2011). Additionally, the Scheme's deadweight, that is housing that would have been built either way given the housing boom Ireland was experiencing at the time, was estimated at 46.4% (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2005), which in line with its cost to the exchequer led to the abolishment of the Scheme only in 2006 and after a series of continuous extensions.

Consumer-Led Rural Gentrification

Research Methodology

This section highlights rural residential mobilities observed in three case studies in Ireland, by focusing on the stated preferences for rural residential environments amongst potential gentrifier and non-gentrifier households. The case study areas constitute rural administrative areas, that is Electoral Divisions (EDs), in three Local Authorities in Ireland, namely Co. Kildare, Co. Tipperary (South) and Co. Clare (Figure 6) with the following characteristics, based on their location and demographic changes:

- Co. Kildare: Peri-urban rural areas that experienced significant population growth;
- Co. Tipperary: Agriculturally based rural areas with average population growth;
- Co. Clare: Remote rural areas, experiencing population decline.

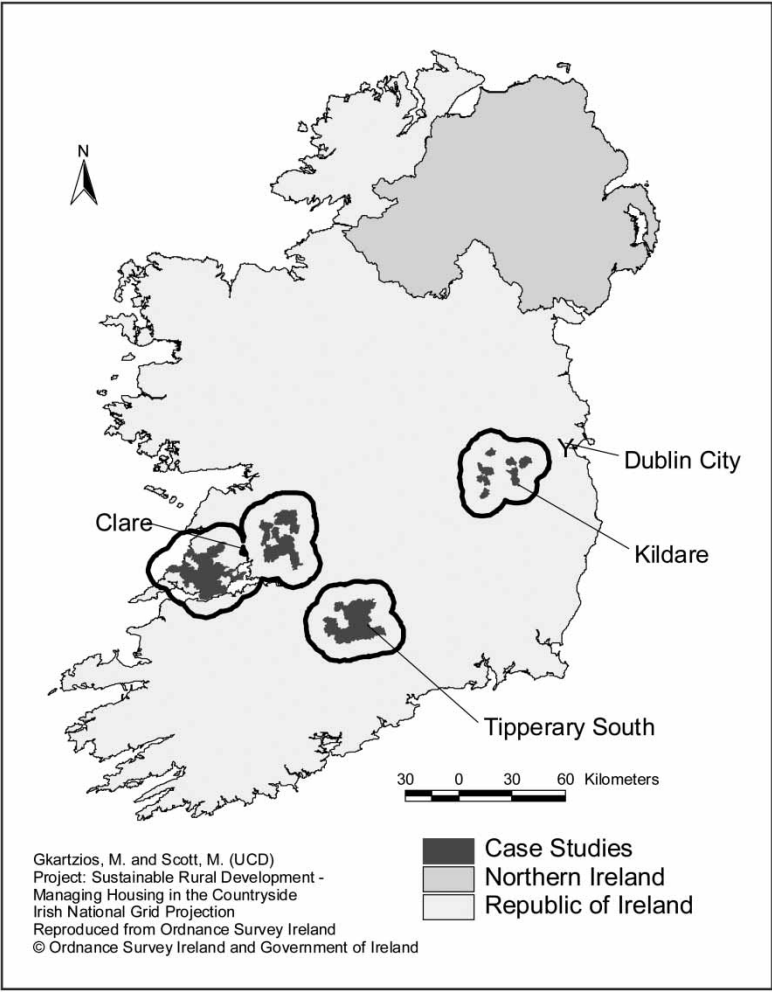


Figure 6. Case study areas.

The three cases were chosen in order to reflect the heterogeneity of rural areas commonly, but not exclusively, found in Ireland, in terms of their demographic and landscape characteristics. For example Co. Kildare is situated within the Greater Dublin Area, subject to significant urban pressure witnessed both in terms of house-building during the boom years and counterurbanization movements from nearby urban environments. Co. South Tipperary on the other is situated in the midlands, with a strong agricultural sector: 12% of the population in 2006 were employed in the primary sector, compared to 4% in Co. Kildare and 7% in Co. Clare. Co. South Tipperary has also been experiencing population increase, however, not at a remarkable level and within the national average percentage growth. Co. Clare finally is situated in the west part of Ireland, and some of its most remote and coastal rural areas have been experiencing prolonged depopulation.

The selection of case study EDs ensured that they are rural localities (defined as such by the Irish Central Statistics Office) and that they experienced the described demographic changes. Each case study area has a population of circa 10,000 people, but they vary greatly in size as they exhibit very different population densities, that is higher in Co. Kildare and very low in Co. Clare. Quota sampling was used to select a representative sample of 1031 households residing in the study areas. Demographic and socio-economic quotas based on the 2002 census¹ of population were set to reflect the population in the study areas. The face-to-face interviews were conducted during the spring/summer of 2007 and each interview lasted approximately 1 h. The interviews were based on a close-ended questionnaire exploring issues around household formation, residential mobility and rationale behind relocation.

The methodology described is not without limitations. First of all, the use of non-probability sample has been criticized for not being representative (Bryman, 2008), although it has also been argued that it can give accurate results (Oppenheim, 1992). Given the lack of sampling frames appropriate to sample rural populations in Ireland and criticisms over the use of databases such as the GeoDirectory in rural contexts², the researchers proceeded with a quota sampling, exploring the above-mentioned issues. Second, the results in this paper are based on a case study research methodology, which is common in research investigating rural residential mobilities. No claim can be made that these rural areas are either typical of the rural areas in the country as a whole; however, the case study areas selected provide an illustrative and information-rich case study in relation to residential mobilities and the potential of gentrification in rural Ireland. Finally, the analysis of the data is also fairly descriptive, drawing on χ^2 tests, appropriate for nominal variables used in this paper.

Identifying a rural middle class is a very challenging task, which is not the purpose of the present paper (see Stockdale, 2010 for a thorough review). It is widely agreed that it 'encompasses a large number of different, diverse occupations and employment situations, and a vast spectrum of household income levels, such that it is difficult to attribute the rural middle class with any common set of values or interests' (Woods, 2005:84). Stockdale (2010) concludes that in identifying potential gentrifiers in quantitative data sets, variables such as education, occupation and income are more appropriate for assigning social class statuses, notwithstanding their own limitations. In Ireland, social class is inherently associated with one's position in the labour market, although this of course is not irrelevant to educational opportunities, income and health (Whelan, 2003).

In this research, survey data on income levels were very poorly recorded, reflecting wider attitudes in Irish society towards disclosing personal financial information. However, survey respondents appeared more forthcoming in describing their occupation and employment status. This variable was chosen as the most appropriate in classifying households into the following two broad social classes, based on the occupation of the head of the household, that is the person in the household with the larger income:

- white-collar, incorporating professional people, top, middle and junior managers, local government and civil servant and all non-manual positions; and
- blue-collar, incorporating all manual positions (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled) and farmers.

On the basis of this dichotomous distinction, potential gentrifiers were identified as white-collar workers who have relocated to their current rural residence. This classification serves the purposes of this paper, with particular reference to a quantitative data set, rather than an argument that gentrifiers are exclusively white-collar rural migrants. It has been well argued that research on rural gentrification may focus on other characteristics, such as ethnicity and race (Nelson *et al.*, 2010), gender (Little, 2002), sexuality (Smith & Holt, 2005) or even on marginal settlers such as Smith's (2007b) study on boat-people. The potential gentrifiers identified in this paper resemble the 'service class' migrants that Urry (1995) used to describe processes of rural gentrification in England. The fact that these potential gentrifiers have relocated from various residential backgrounds, both local and non-local, urban and rural, allows for a more inclusive way of assessing rural gentrification beyond uni-directional urban-to-rural long distance movements (see also Milbourne, 2007), acknowledging all the diverse movements that take place in the rural settlement (Mitchell, 2004).

Potential Gentrifiers

Our case study data suggest (Table 1) that there were significantly more white-collar workers within the recent migrants group (45%) compared to the proportion of white-collar workers in older migrants (38%) and permanent residents (37%). However, this may also be the result of upward social mobility within the case study localities, indicative of increasing service sector employment in rural areas, in addition to middle class in-migration. It should be noted that our data show in total 662 migrant households, the vast majority of which (73%) moved only within the last 10 years. This is reflective of the intensity of rural mobility in Ireland during the boom years associated with significant housing construction.

In this study, our particular interest is to sub-sample white-collar rural migrants presented in Table 2 (230 households) which, for this study, comprises the 'potential gentrifiers', while the equivalent blue-collar migrant households group (306 households) forms the 'non-gentrifiers'. Professions associated with both the gentrifier and non-gentrifier migrant groups as found in our three case studies are described in Table 3. Table 2 exhibits the diversity of rural migration presented in our case studies. All types of residential movements have been recorded, including counter-urbanization, that is relocations from bigger size settlements to the current rural localities, local movements within the same settlement,

Table 1. Social class (permanent and migrant rural households, N = 1031 households)

Social class	Recent migrants (< 10 years)	Older migrants (> 10 years)	Permanent residents (> 20 years)	Total
White-collar workers (%)	220 (45)	68 (38)	135 (37)	423
Blue-collar workers (%)	263 (55)	111 (62)	228 (63)	602
Total	483 ^a	179	363 ^b	1025

Note: $\chi^2 = 6.94, p < 0.05$ (df = 2).

^aData missing for two households.

^bData missing for four households.

Table 2. Migration types (migrant households only, $N = 662$ households)

Previous residence in ...	White-collar workers (%)	Blue-collar workers (%)	Total
... the same area (local movements)	49 (21)	107 (35)	156
... a bigger sized settlement (counter-urbanization)	145 (63)	125 (41)	270
... a smaller sized settlement	18 (8)	29 (9)	47
... a similar sized settlement (lateral migration)	18 (8)	45 (15)	63
Total	230 ^a	306 ^b	536

Note: $\chi^2 = 26.96$, $p < 0.001$ (df = 3).

^aData missing for 58 households.

^bData missing for 68 households.

Table 3. Occupations associated with the gentrifier and non-gentrifier migrants

Potential gentrifiers	Operation/office supervisor/manager; doctor, consultant; solicitor; social worker; shop owner/manager; teacher; publican; civil servant; policeman/police officer; musician; nurse; hotel manager; environmental scientist, engineer; company director; architect, accountant; administrator; therapist; bank manager; advertiser
Non-gentrifiers	Waiter; truck driver; tiler; taxi driver; technician; storeman; painter; roofer; road marker; carpenter; builder; plumber; plasterer; machine operator/driver; labourer; gardener; farmer; factory worker/operative; electrician; cook; fitter; construction worker; bar assistant; builder

movements from smaller sized settlements, that is from areas that were conceived to be more rural and movements amongst similar in size rural area types. Our data reflect previous academic discussions aiming at differentiating between rural gentrification and counterurbanization (Phillips, 2010). In particular, our case studies exhibit that not all counter-urbanites are white-collar workers and, vice versa, not all white-collar workers who have relocated in the case study areas are coming from previous urban residential environments. Potential gentrifier households resettled predominantly from more urbanized areas (63%), but also from other rural areas perceived to be as 'more rural' (8%) or other similar size rural areas (8%). Additionally, 21% of white-collar workers resettled only locally, meaning that their previous residence was in the same village or settlement. It could be argued that these relocations hardly represent aspects of gentrification, at least gentrification which results from exogenous forces. However, these movements still result in consumption of local housing in rural areas (more likely housing of better quality) and they could potentially compete more successfully for local housing than other lower income groups, both internal and external to the locality. For this reason, they are also considered as part of the potential gentrifier sample for this paper.

It has been well argued that rural gentrification is far from being homogenous (Darling, 2005; Stockdale, 2010). Instead spatial variation can be expected. Our case study data suggest that there is some geographical selection amongst potential gentrifiers, in that the peri-urban rural case study demonstrates higher level of potential gentrifiers, compared to the other rural study areas. In particular, the Kildare case exhibits a larger group of potential gentrifiers as a percentage of rural migrants in the locality (50%), compared to

Table 4. Social class and case study areas (migrant households only, $N = 662$ households)

	Kildare	Clare	Tipperary	Total
Gentrifiers (%)	127 (50)	99 (42)	62 (35)	288
Non-gentrifiers (%)	125 (50)	135 (58)	114 (65)	374
Total	252	234	176	662

Note: $\chi^2 = 9.91$, $p < 0.05$ (df = 2).

the ones in Clare (42%) and South Tipperary (35%) (Table 4). These results were expected to some extent and can be explained by the characteristics of the Kildare case study, a rural area within close proximity to the capital Dublin city, subject to more intense urban pressures and, consequently, attracting more potential gentrifier households than the other case studies. The Kildare case study has also attracted relatively more residents from more urban residential environments (that is counter-urbanites) than the other case studies, suggesting that counter-urbanization and gentrification in such peri-urban locations are closely linked, however, they are not synonymous processes.

Additionally, Table 4 reveals that the majority of rural migrants in all case studies (56%) could not be seen as potentially gentrifiers, at least when these are identified regarding their professional background. This suggests that rural residential mobility in Ireland might not be predominantly associated with managerial and service provision professionals moving in the countryside, as reported, for example, in some rural areas in England (Cloke *et al.*, 1995). More importantly, the high numbers of non-gentrifiers can be explained through the permissive planning system that operates in Ireland which has facilitated rural house-building for people who are either local or can demonstrate a sort of 'local need', that is usually through family connections, employment in agriculture, etc. In this planning regime, migration of white-collar workers to a rural locality does not necessarily suggest that there has been a displacement of locals, particularly when referring to new house-building.

Understanding Residential Mobilities

All rural migrant households ($N = 662$) were asked to cite the main reason for relocating to the countryside. In the following table (Table 5), we disaggregated the stated motivations for moving to the rural locality for the potential gentrifier and the non-gentrifier households. The results highlight some similarities and differences amongst the two migrant groups and their motives for relocating. For example, 32% of the potential gentrifiers cite the 'rural' characteristics of the destination as the main reason for relocating, referring to both physical and social features of the rural environment or community in which they are living. On the other hand, the most frequently cited response from the non-gentrifier migrants (30%) as a reason to relocate, were the characteristics of the house, referring usually to a bigger sized house. This answer scored high amongst the potential gentrifier migrants too, with 22% citing better housing as the primary reason for the move. While non-gentrifiers appear to value also 'rural' characteristics of the destination (29%), very few of them (9%) expressed economic rationality, for example moving in the rural destination because housing there is more affordable or because the cost of life in rural areas is cheaper. On the other hand, 21% of the potential gentrifiers

Table 5. Reasons for moving to current residence (migrant households only, $N = 662$ households)

Reason for relocating	Gentrifiers (%)	Non-gentrifiers (%)	Total
Economic needs	51 (21)	28 (9)	79
Social of physical features	79 (32)	91 (29)	170
Location (accessibility)	15 (6)	25 (8)	40
Housing characteristics	55 (22)	94 (30)	149
Build/get my own house	14 (6)	25 (8)	39
Change in household composition	16 (6)	22 (7)	38
Other reasons	18 (7)	27 (9)	45
Total	248 ^a	312 ^b	560

Note: $\chi^2 = 19.03$, $p < 0.05$ (df = 6).

^aData missing for 40 households.

^bData missing for 62 households.

in our case studies referred to economic needs as the main reason for moving. Different motivations amongst gentrifier and non-gentrifiers were drawn by Stockdale (2010) too, suggesting that gentrifier migrant households in rural Scotland also emphasized economic considerations such as employment (and in particular shifts towards self-employment) and housing. However, for both gentrifiers and non-gentrifiers, the consumption of rurality and the availability of space are important factors.

All migrant households subsequently were asked whether they would consider moving in the following next 5 years. The answers (Table 6) showed that the majority of both gentrifier (64%) and non-gentrifier (71%) migrants does not consider moving again in the near future. Nevertheless, the potential gentrifier migrants appeared to be slightly more likely to move again (30%) compared to the non-gentrifiers (21%).

According to Table 7, there were significantly more potential gentrifier households (55%) moving to single detached houses, compared to non-gentrifier ones (38%). However, there were no significant differences between the numbers of gentrifier and non-gentrifier households relocating to either existing settlements (i.e. villages) or to the open countryside. Similarly, there were no statistical differences between these two groups and whether they moved to a new or second-hand house, as almost 50% of both gentrifier and non-gentrifier migrant households moved to a new house. The data, however, exhibit that rural in-migration in Ireland, has been frequently associated, especially during the pre-recession period for the Irish economy, with significant house-

Table 6. Considering moving in the next following years (migrant households only, $N = 662$ households)

	Gentrifiers (%)	Non-gentrifiers (%)	Total
Unlikely or very unlikely	186 (64)	266 (71)	452
Likely or very likely	86 (30)	79 (21)	165
Don't know	16 (6)	28 (8)	44
Total	288	373 ^a	661

Note: $\chi^2 = 6.91$, $p < 0.05$ (df = 2).

^aData missing for one household.

Table 7. Types of housing migrant households moving into (migrant households only, $N = 662$ households)

Type of housing	Gentrifiers (%)	Non-gentrifiers (%)	Total
Detached	157 (55)	141 (38)	298
Semi-detached	82 (29)	105 (28)	187
Terraced	46 (16)	124 (33)	170
Total	285 ^a	370 ^b	655

Note: $\chi^2 = 28.93$, $p < 0.001$ (df = 2).

^aData missing for three households.

^bData missing for four households.

building. That differs from England — for example — where these processes have occurred without significant change in the settlement pattern, due to rural housing supply restrictions.

Our results, exhibit another characteristic element of rural in-migration in the Republic of Ireland. According to Table 8, the majority of migrants actually grew up in rural areas, either in a rural settlement or in the open countryside (71%). That could have been expected for migrants moving across different rural areas, but that was also the case for counter-urban migrants (55%), suggesting that these migrants returned back to rural areas (potentially in rural areas or origin), after a period of living in urban areas, usually for employment and educational purposes. Similarly, the majority of both potential gentrifiers (70%) and non-gentrifiers (78%) grew up in the open countryside or in a rural settlement, although significantly higher numbers of gentrifiers grew up also in more urban environments (21%) compared to non-gentrifiers (8%) (Table 9).

Table 8. Migration types and area of growing up until the age of 12 (migrant households only, $N = 662$ households)

Previous residence in ...	Grew up in the open countryside	Grew up in a village (<1500)	Grew up in a town (<10,000)	Grew up in a big town or a city	Total
... the same area (local movements) (%)	53 (34)	87 (57)	4 (3)	10 (6)	154
... a bigger sized settlement (counter-urbanization) (%)	74 (28)	72 (27)	38 (14)	83 (31)	267
... a smaller sized settlement (%)	12 (26)	25 (54)	5 (11)	4 (9)	46
... a similar sized settlement (lateral migration) (%)	32 (52)	22 (35)	2 (3)	6 (10)	62
Total (%)	171 ^a (32)	206 ^b (39)	49 ^c (9)	103 ^d (20)	529

Note: $\chi^2 = 89.35$, $p < 0.001$ (df = 9).

^aData missing for 54 households.

^bData missing for 64 households.

^cData missing for nine households.

^dData missing for six households.

Table 9. Social class and area of growing up until the age of 12 (migrant households only, $N = 662$ households)

Grew up in ...	Gentrifiers (%)	Non-gentrifiers (%)	Total
... the open countryside	94 (34)	126 (34)	220
... a village (<1500 people)	100 (36)	165 (44)	265
... a town (<10,000 people)	26 (9)	31 (9)	57
... a big town or a city	60 (21)	47 (13)	107
Total	280 ^a	369 ^b	649

Note: $\chi^2 = 10.61$, $p < 0.05$ (df = 3).

^aData missing for eight households.

^bData missing for five households.

Conclusion

Recent years have witnessed an increasing range of studies investigating gentrification processes at a range of spatial scales and within contrasting localities (Phillips, 2005; Smith, 2007b; Stockdale, 2010). Rural gentrification theorization has tended to debate the merits of productive or consumption led explanations underpinning gentrification processes, while empirical studies (primarily of UK origin) have tended to focus on consumer-led research. In this paper, drawing on Ireland, we aimed to explore processes of rural gentrification through first state-led policies, such as land-use planning and housing policies, and second through investigating consumer-led relocation in rural areas by white-collar workers.

In the first instance, the operation of a *laissez-faire* rural planning regime, in combination with the economic boom experienced in Ireland from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, has facilitated significant housing development in the countryside, both within rural settlements but also in the open countryside. In general, the attitude that prevailed amongst policy-makers was pro-development and indeed Redmond *et al.* (2010) note that locally elected representatives are overwhelmingly in favour of accommodating new housing in rural areas. Notably, in a rural region in the north west of the country, amidst a period of significant housing activity nationally, the state sponsored housing developments through offering an attractive tax relief package, as seen with the RRS, in an effort to attract new rural residents and boost local economic activity. Such policies have been widely criticized for failing to deliver a coordinated and coherent policy framework for managing settlement growth (Gkartzios & Scott, 2009), for failing to integrate planning policy goals into wider rural development initiatives (Scott & Murray, 2009) and in particular for the RRS, for contributing to excess housing supply and vacant dwellings in the countryside (Kitchin *et al.*, 2010; Gkartzios & Norris, 2011).

However, much less attention has been paid to the fact that such policies, implicitly perhaps, have provided an important frame for gentrification processes in the countryside characterized, in an Irish context at least, by significant housing development, both self-build and speculative developer-led. This policy perspective towards accommodating rural housing has been a common survival strategy of many farmers as farm household incomes continue to decline. Drawing on gentrification theory, these supply-side issues *potentially* provide essential preconditions for gentrification to occur in rural localities — however, these supply-side factors also frame wider processes of rural housing

change, including facilitating new house-building to accommodate local residential mobility (including up-sizing) and second homes. Similarly, some of the physical evidence of change, including larger homes, shifting styles of house design, apartments developed in rural localities and so on, *may* be interpreted as the consumption of symbolic capital by the new middle classes seeking to consume the representation of tradition, heritage and rurality within their expression of gentrified lifestyles (Smith & Phillips, 2001). On the other hand, these visual symbols of rural change may also represent the changing rural attitudes towards house design, upward social mobility, the revalorization of rurality by rural dwellers, and more restrictive housing design regulation by local planning officials.

To explore these issues further, the paper also examined demand-side or consumer-led factors in relation to rural residential mobility. An analysis of white-collar rural in-migrants across three structurally diverse rural case studies in Ireland revealed a number of conclusions. First, while rural gentrification debates have emerged in the UK literature, the process is perhaps less widespread in an Irish context. The majority of the households in our case studies which have been identified as migrant, belonged to a non-gentrifier group consisting of people working in all types of manual posts. The prevalence of blue-collar workers amongst migrant households suggests that gentrification theory may only be partially revealing in analysing rural mobility trends as (potential) rural gentrifiers represent only one part of rural in-migrants. Furthermore, in the Irish case, displacement of locals may not necessarily result from increasing numbers of affluent in-migrants as a result of relatively lax controls on new housing development. Therefore, a more lax regime for rural planning in Ireland may produce more socially equitable outcomes in terms of socially balanced rural communities through less intense competition for existing housing resources as housing demands are often accommodated through new-build. Although rural areas in Ireland may be subject to middle class capture, the reality is more complex with in-migration flows from a diverse range of groups, while locals may also devise strategies that enable them to remain rural and local. De Groot *et al.* (2010) arrive at similar conclusions in relation to accessible rural areas in the Netherlands.

Second, amongst all migrant households, counterurbanization was the most common migration movement observed across both potential gentrifiers and non-gentrifiers. This reflects the predominance of population flows that these rural areas are receiving from other more urbanized places. However, this is not to suggest that all gentrifiers are counter-urbanites, as identified gentrifiers migrated also either locally or from other rural areas. Conversely, almost half of counter-urban migrants were not part of the gentrifier sample. From a policy perspective, this may appear as a nuanced distinction; however, understanding underlying market trends is central to effective policy prescription in rural areas. For example, policies to mitigate the impacts of local displacement may be misdirected if, rather than gentrification processes from new rural dwellers, housing markets are characterized by local, upward social mobility.

Indeed, a number of factors undermine the gentrification hypothesis. Importantly, a significant percentage of the potential gentrifiers we identified have rural roots. This suggests that many of these potential gentrifiers are households returning to a rural area (presumably where they grew up) following a period living in an urban centre, reflecting a strong attachment to rural localities and indicative of the influence of lifecourse factors on housing mobility — for example, returning to a ‘rural home’ to raise children or to retire. In these cases, return migrants may have similar characteristics to gentrifiers (service-based employment, university education, etc.), but rather than a process of

gentrification, these migrants may indicate a process of local social mobility. Similarly, interpreting rural change through the lens of gentrification debates, perhaps relegates the importance of local residential mobility and local social mobility, and there is a danger of confusing the visual indicators of rural change and gentrification with a more diverse range of underlying processes. In this regard, the gentrification literature is perhaps only partially revealing of rural housing change and mobility.

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Notes

1. By the time of the fieldwork, the 2006 census of population had already been conducted in Ireland, but as data from this census were not fully available, quotas were based on the most recent and available data at that time, i.e. the 2002 census.
2. For example, the electoral register is no longer publicly available for research purposes; there are no postal codes in Ireland; and the GeoDirectory of addresses do not provide accurate information in rural locations.

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