

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF RETURN MIGRATION IN A SMALL PARISH:
A CASE-STUDY OF CAHIR, CO.TIPPERARY

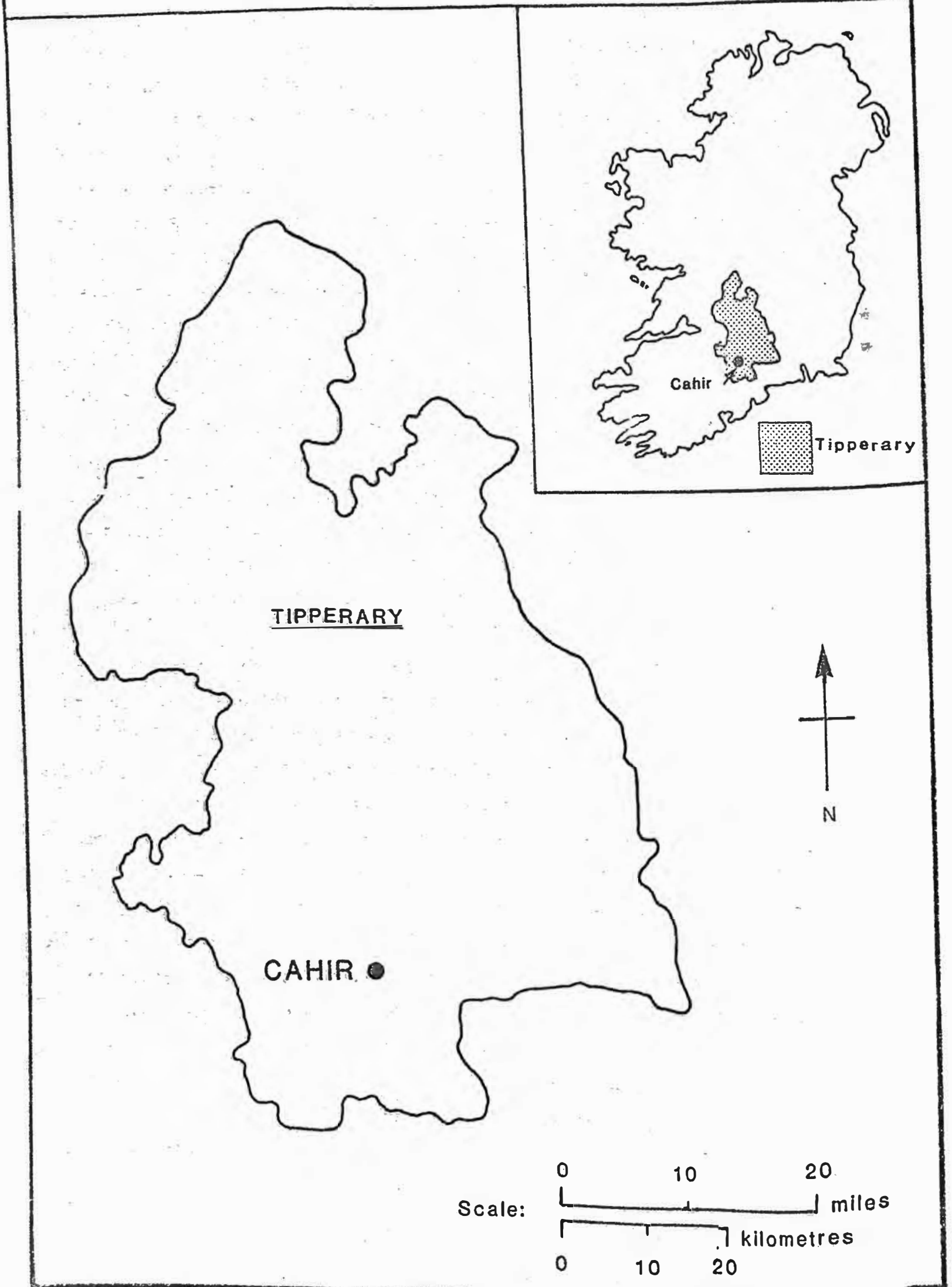
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The Irish have a long tradition of emigration. The United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and Canada all have sizeable Irish populations. The Irish abroad have celebrated in song and story their yearning to return "to the ould sod", yet how many of them do return to their native shore? According to Jackson (1967), in a study of the Skibbereen area of Cork County, one person in four had lived or worked abroad at some stage in their lives. This figure would appear to be exaggerated if applied to the entire country. However, there is no doubt that many Irish people have worked abroad either by choice or due to economic exigencies. Yet, despite the large number of people who have worked abroad and subsequently returned to Ireland, there is a severe dearth of research on the subject and what little exists tends to concentrate exclusively on the economic impact of return. This present paper concentrates on the social effects of return migration within a small geographic area, that of the parish. The area chosen for study was Cahir town and parish (Fig.1). The town is located in South Tipperary, twelve miles south of Cashel and ten miles west of Clonmel. The parish comprises the town and thirty-six rural townlands. The population is approximately 2000 people.

In considering the social implications of return migration, it is important to remember the assumptions of the behaviouralists that the longer a migrant has remained abroad, the more difficult will be re-integration since he/she will have assimilated many of the attitudes and perspectives of the general mass of the population of the area. (White and Woods, 1980). In many instances, these new attitudes will be different from the migrants original attitudes and this being the case "home" when the migrants return will have become "alien" to them and a period of re-adjustment will have to be endured. Because of this, the effect of length of absence on re-integration is examined first. The second area of analysis involves measuring the extent of social integration/alienation of the migrants with the local community. This is measured comprehensively by examining the number and intensity of both formal and informal links of the migrants with the general population of the parish. Finally, the role of return migration as an agent of change within the parish is examined.

FIG. 1

Location Map of Study Area



Return migrants are defined as people who moved into Cahir Parish during the period 1971-1981, having spent a minimum of six months outside the twenty-six counties, with the intention of taking up permanent resident in the parish. However, the returnees need not have formerly been residents of Cahir. "Returned" is used in the context of returning to the Republic of Ireland. Most of the information was obtained through a questionnaire survey and informal interviews. Questions were short in order to obtain the maximum response rate. The questionnaire was divided into three separate sections. The first section attempted to identify the determinants of out-migration and return migration. Section two assessed the level of social involvement and community integration of the returnees with the local community. Formal links such as membership of clubs and societies were examined and informal links such as number of friends and neighbours and migrants perception of their similarity/dissimilarity to that of the locals was also assessed. Section three of the questionnaire attempted to quantify the economic impact of return upon the parish. However, this is not a concern of the present paper. All of the questionnaires were administered personally and are classified as "informal". In total, forty questionnaires were administered and concerned 155 people including migrants, their spouses and children. The respondents were selected using personal knowledge of the study area and also by utilising information from local people. Half of the sample population was selected from Cahir town and the remaining half from the 36 rural townlands which constitute the parish. The thirty-six rural townlands were divided into four geographic sectors. Each one of the sectors A,B,C and D corresponded to areas North, South, East and West of the town. One quarter of the remaining 50 percent of the sample population was selected from each one of the sectors, A,B,C and D.

Time is recognised as one of the primary components in the process of acculturation. Therefore, the length of absence from Ireland is examined to see if it presented a significant barrier to either the rate or extent of readjustment. However, before coming to any conclusions about the effect of length of time spent away on re-integration, it is important to note that all of those interviewed had been in Ireland for at least five years. Such a lengthy period may affect their ability to assess objectively both the host and home communities. Goldsmith's admonishment of memory may be applicable "Oh memory! thou fond deceiver"! However, allowing for this possible

subjectivity, the role of time in influencing the re-integration of the migrants still has to be addressed. White and Woods (1980) claim as a general law that the majority of migrants will return within five years of leaving home because the pain of the so-called "settling in period" is too acute and migrants return rather than endure the hardship involved. This propensity to return within five years has been substantiated in previous research. A study of return migration to the Boyle area of Co. Roscommon revealed that almost 50 percent of those returning did so within five years (Foeken, 1980). However, the economic structure of the sending community has a direct bearing on the propensity to return. In areas where agriculture is the main employer, the occurrence of return within the first five years tends to be high. Foeken (1980), White and Woods (1980) and Gmelch (1986) all found a high incidence of return among migrants from a farming background. For example, 41.8 percent of migrants from the Boyle area gave "inheriting a farm or shop or assisting their family" as the reason for returning. In the present study, only 2.9 percent of those interviewed listed these reasons for returning. Such a low percentage among the migrants is easily explained when one looks at the economic structure for the parish population as a whole, only 3 percent of the total population of Cahir in the 1981 Census were farmers. The low percentage of farmers in the parish helps to explain why the returnees to Cahir stayed abroad longer than those from a more agricultural area. The inheritance of a farm or returning to assist on the family farm was not a motive for return. The migrants were forced into achieving economic success in the host country or "returning as failures", (Crease, 1970, quoted in King, 1986). Crease classified those returning within the first five years of migration as "failures" unless they were returning to inherit land, property or a business. Because of the lack of such potential to inherit land, the majority of returnees in the present study remained abroad for a lengthy period, the average period abroad being 16.32 years. Such a lengthy absence would suggest a considerable degree of difficulty in re-adjusting when the migrant returns. Is this the case?

According to Lewis, 1982, one of the best measures of social integration of returnees is their participation in accepted non-conflictual activities such as clubs and societies. In a study of migration (not return migration) from one state to another in the U.S. Mid-West, it was found that the level of participation in clubs/societies increased with length of residence in the "host"

community, secondly the greater the perceived similarity of the migrants' outlook to that of the community at large the more frequently and quicker that migrants participated in local activities (Zimmer,1970). These findings on migrants participation in formal activities were confirmed in the present study. Firstly, the level of participation in clubs/societies increased with length of residence. Overall 64.7 percent of those questioned either participated themselves, or members of their families participated in "formal" activities in the parish. Returnees who participated had been home for an average of 10.47 years but had only been participating in "formal" activities for an average of 5.8 years. A difficulty in analysis arises here since the majority of participants in "formal" activities were not originally from Cahir Parish but had "returned" to Ireland. Does the "lag-period" of 4.67 years between return and participation indicate difficulty in re-settling in Irish society in general because of the migration experience or is the "lag-period" to be expected because it is these particular migrants first time in the parish? The evidence suggests the latter, as the remaining participants in formal activities who had originally lived in the parish prior to out-migration, began participating in clubs and societies almost immediately on return. Zimmer also asserts that the frequency of participation increases with length of residence. Again, this was found to be true of the present study. Most of the returnees who participated in formal activities had been at home for over ten years and took part in their chosen club/society on at least a weekly basis. Twelve per cent participated on a daily basis (Fig.2).

Another measure of the integration and contribution of returnees to the local community is their position within the organisation of which they are members. Smyth (1986,p.172) has claimed that returnees contribute to the vibrancy of community life through organisational skills they may have acquired while abroad. This appears to be true of the present group of migrants. Out of the 64.7 percent who did take part in formal activities, over two-thirds served at committee level (Fig.3). This indicates that returnees provide valuable leadership roles within the community. Two of the migrants in the present study had been instrumental in starting new societies, two others were responsible for re-starting a defunct club, many others served in key roles in clubs and societies such as Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. Overall, the picture that emerges from returnee

FIG. 2 FREQUENCY OF PARTICIPATION OF RETURNEES IN CLUBS/SOCIETIES

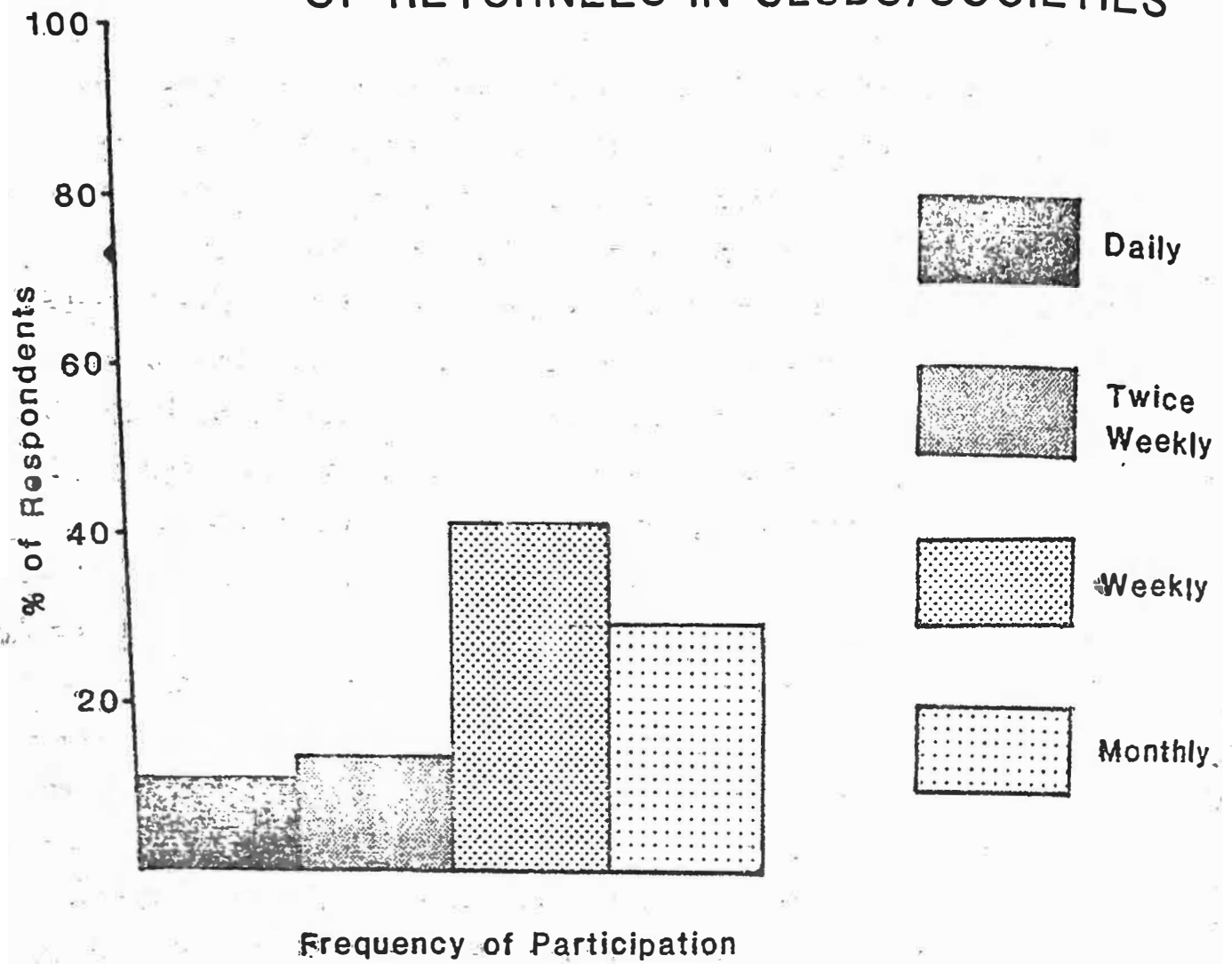
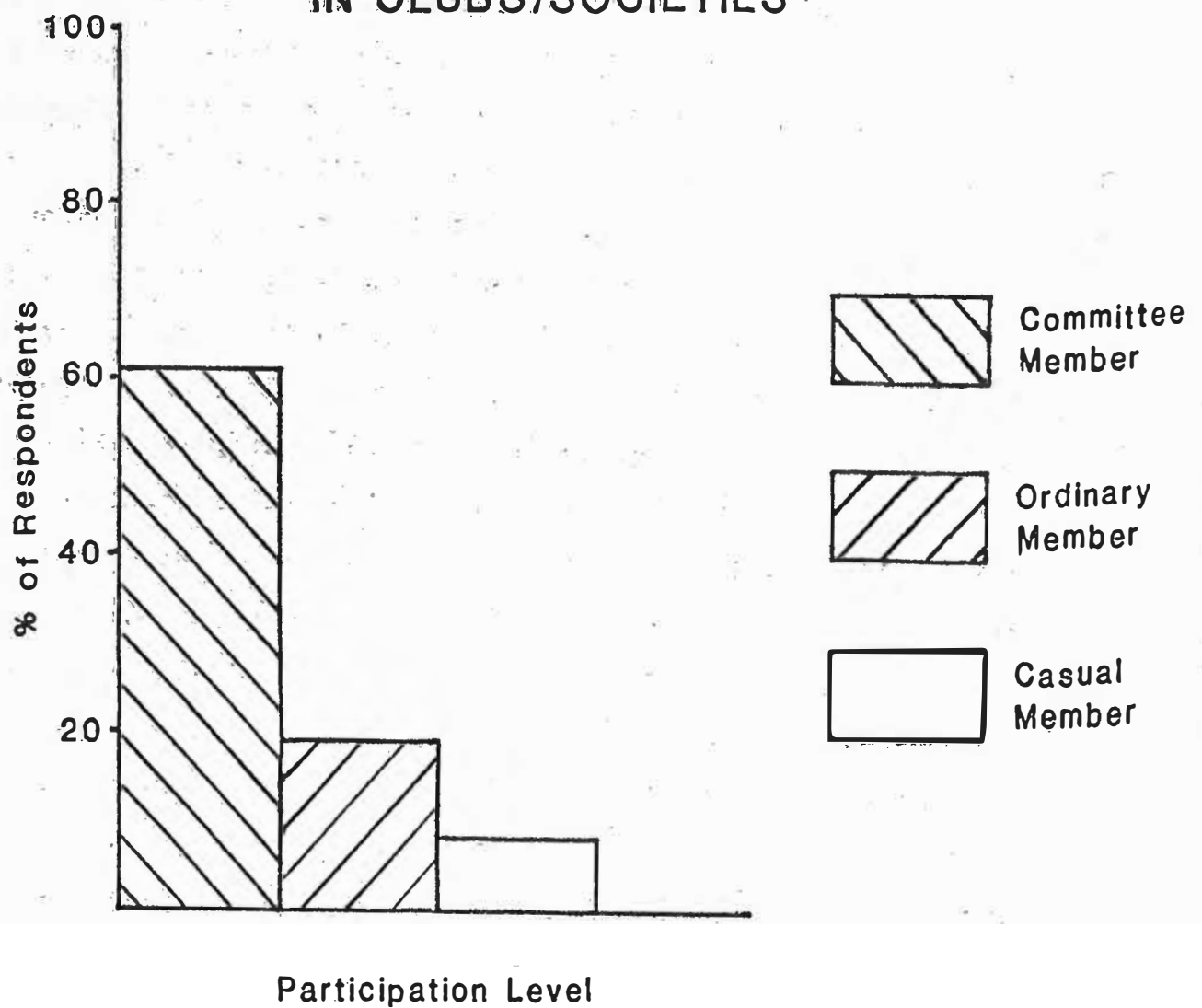


FIG. 3 PARTICIPATION LEVEL OF RETURNEES IN CLUBS/SOCIETIES

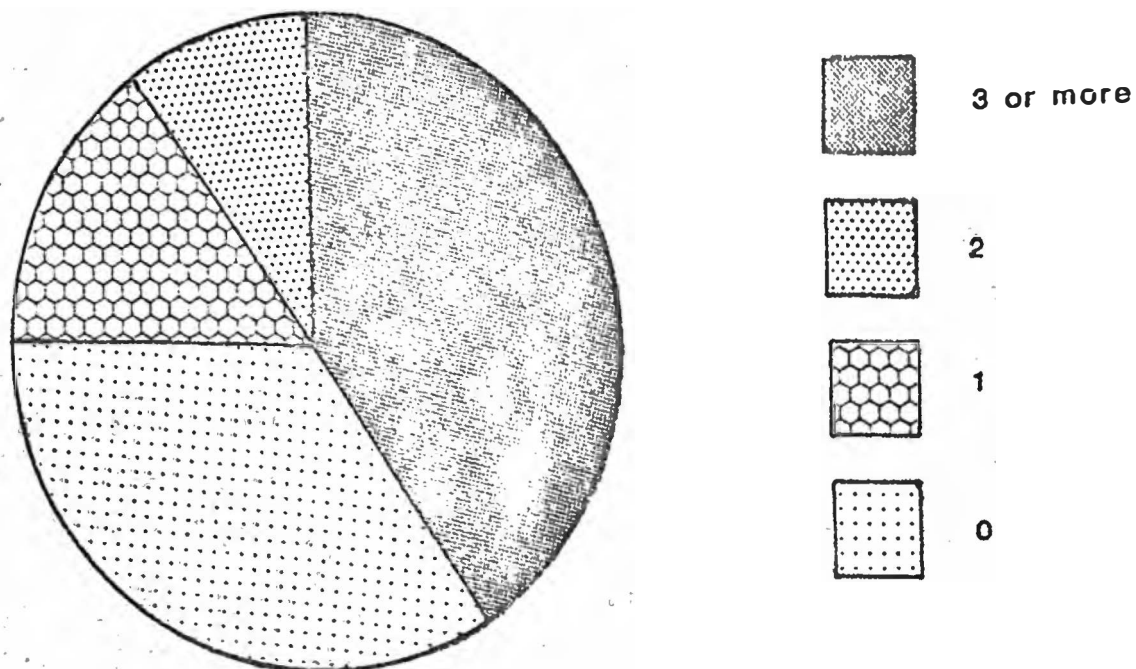


participation in "formal" activities is a positive one. The high degree of involvement in clubs and societies indicates that no chasm exists between the local community and returnees. It is also apparent, from the high number of migrants serving at committee level, that return migration is providing the local community with people who possess valuable organisational skills which are being utilised within the parish.

Gmelch (1986) and others feel that measuring re-integration viz. "formal" ties of returnees with the community is not a valid measure of social interaction. Membership of clubs/societies and especially serving on committees is construed as an attempt by the returnee to achieve high social status in the local community. The migrant is seen as using his/her experience abroad as a means of getting elected onto such committees. Once elected the migrant sets about showing the locals "how things should be done". The migrant may be highly innovative and be a source of endless novel "foreign" approaches to solving problems which may arise in the club/society which he/she may be involved with. However, this may not lead to the migrant endearing himself to the local community. In fact the opposite is more likely to occur, the migrant will be perceived as arrogant and disrespectful of "local" methods of problem-solving. Because of such divergent attitudes, a more meaningful measure of social cohesion between returnees and locals may be obtained by examining the number of friendships and perceived quality of neighbours which returnees possessed.

With improvements in transportation, particularly with the increase in car ownership and subsequent increase in mobility, it is recognised that friendship is no longer dependent on propinquity but on shared interests. However, since the study area was small and traditionally Irish rural communities are thought of as having intimate social networks (Smyth, 1986), it was felt that friendships within the local area would be the best indicator of returnees re-integration into the local community. Respondents were asked to think of their three closest friends (apart from their family) who lived nearby within approximately ten minutes walk. The results show that returnees had few problems in establishing friendships, almost half of those interviewed listed two or more friends living close by. (Fig.4). The overall high percentage of friends living in close proximity show that returnees had little difficulty in finding and sharing common interests

FIG.4 NUMBER OF FRIENDS WITHIN TEN MINUTES WALK



with the native community. However, a sizeable percentage (26.5 percent) complained that they had no friends living nearby. They felt themselves dissimilar to the "locals" and considered their interests as transcending the local community. Another measure of social cohesion which was used was to assess the number of relatives and in-laws in the parish to whom the migrants felt close. The results show many of the migrants had close family ties to the parish. Sixty-two per cent had relatives and in-laws to whom they felt close, living nearby.

The relationship of returnees with their neighbours was also measured. The response served to illustrate what Gans (1979) and others have found that a neighbour need not be a friend and a friend need not be a neighbour. For example, while half of those interviewed expressed the view that their neighbours were "very good" and would not hesitate to call upon them in a crisis, only one quarter considered their neighbours "very similar" to themselves (Table 1). However, overall the returnees relationship with their neighbours indicates there is community cooperation between both groups with only 2.9 percent of migrants considering their neighbours "poor" or unhelpful and one-fifth perceived their neighbours to be dissimilar to themselves. Overall, the migrants' informal links with the community as a whole were found to be extensive and intimate, thus tending to refute what Gmelch (1986) terms the "returned yank" syndrome in the West. In his study in the West of Ireland, most returnees perceived themselves as different from the locals and were also themselves perceived by the locals as being different, i.e. they were no longer locals returning home but returned yanks. The term "yank" refers to

the degree of acculturation which the migrant has undergone while abroad and is clearly influenced by the length of time which the migrant spent abroad. As mentioned previously, the average period spent abroad by returnees in the present study was 16.32 years. Did such a lengthy period abroad result in the migrant assimilating values, attitudes and perceptions which would cause a difficulty of readjustment on return?

TABLE 1

RETURNEES PERCEPTION OF THEIR NEIGHBOURS

Neighbours are:	Percent	Neighbours are:	Percent
Very Good	50	Very Similar	26.4
Fairly Good	47.1	Fairly Similar	53.0
Poor	2.9	Not Similar at all	20.6

A classification system of return migration which stressed the temporal dimension and which has had a good deal of impact on recent research is the typology developed by Crease (1970 and 1974) from his study of Italians returning from the United States. Crease's main thesis is that the impact of return migration depends largely on the stage in the process of acculturation the migrant has reached in the host country at the moment of return. Crease asserts that once the migrant has spent more than ten years away from home he/she will encounter difficulties of a social nature on return. According to his typology, over 66 percent of those returning to Cahir were or should be orientated towards their host society. Crease's model deals with movement from one distinct culture to another. How valid the model is in other contexts is not made clear by Crease. What is clear, however, is that it is not applicable in the present study. The length of absence appears to have very little influence on the extent of re-integration.

There are a number of reasons for this ease of re-integration after such a lengthy absence. The vast majority (over 80 percent) of returnees to Cahir returned from the U.K., a country which is in closer proximity to Ireland in terms of both miles and culture than the U.S. is to Italy. Secondly, the cities in the United Kingdom which the emigrants gravitated to contained very large Irish communities. Ninety percent of the migrants had returned from London, Liverpool and

Manchester, all of which contain sizeable Irish populations. Because of the large number of Irish already in these cities and because of the similarity in culture, the migrants may be seen to have applied the principle of "least cost" in deciding to locate in the United Kingdom. Such a move according to White and Woods (1980) involves the least amount of "psychic pain" and therefore the migrant found little difficulty in staying away for a long period. According to White and Woods, locating in a familiar milieu allows migrants to remain orientated towards the sending community despite being away for such a lengthy period. The most significant fact in the present study indicating that the migrants remained orientated towards the "home" community while away is that forty-one percent gave the reason for return as "disliked being away". Surprisingly, most of this group were the migrants who had been away for twenty years or more which again seems to contradict what Crease suggests in his model of return migration. Even though the migrant remained abroad for twenty years or more, he/she harboured a latent desire to return during this period which eventually led to his/her return. In conclusion, then, it may be said that the long period spent in the host community did not result in the migrant being fully assimilated into the host culture and therefore little difficulty was experienced in re-integration.

Finally, the possible role of migrants as agents of change was examined. Investigating whether or not returnees effected change or promoted the retention of existing values and attitudes is one of the most difficult aspects of return migration to assess. No longer can any Irish community be considered "parochial". People in every townland are exposed to "external" ideas and attitudes through television, radio, magazines, tourism and travel. In short, it is difficult to disentangle the possible role of migrants as culture change agents from other "external" influences. In many cases, the returnees cultural experiences are only distinguishable from their non-migrant neighbours in terms of degree not of kind. However, from the type of advantages and disadvantages of living in Cahir which the returnees listed, it is possible to discern that they did not wish to bring about any radical change in the parish. The advantages and disadvantages listed of life in Cahir compared to last location were typical of those experienced by people moving from any large city to any small rural community. They were related to the varying sizes of such communities, e.g. the migrants felt there were fewer employment

opportunities in Cahir compared to the large cities of the U.K., but also believed such a small community was a superior place to raise a family than the large city where they lived prior to their return. The same advantages and disadvantages would have been enumerated by the migrants had they moved to any similar sized small community within the United Kingdom.

The chief advantages of life in Cahir as perceived by the migrant are those traditionally associated with small rural communities: "slower pace of life", "peace and quiet", "good environmental conditions", "less crime and violence" and "proximity to family and friends" were among the advantages listed. It must be said that these may be termed a "geography of the mind", unlike the physical landscape which requires some physical force to alter its shape. All a "geography of the mind" requires for change is an alteration in perception. Such an alteration occurred in the minds of the migrants regarding their sending and host communities. The returnees were questioned as to their motives for their initial out-migration and for their eventual return. The vast majority of migrants left Cahir or some similar small rural community in Ireland because it was perceived as economically stagnant and socially restrictive. This is understandable since the average age of the migrant was 18.2 years on leaving the home community. However, while living in the host country, the migrant entered a different stage in the life-cycle and with this change there was a concomitant alteration in values and perceptions of the host and home areas. "Home" was no longer perceived as insular or stifling but as a sanctuary of "peace and quiet". Equally the opportunities offered to the migrant in the large cities of the United Kingdom had become dis-economies. What appeared to be vibrant and exciting to the young migrant had been transmuted to a source of stress for the middle-aged parent. The single most important reason listed for return was that the returnee "disliked being away". Since this was a comparative judgement, it must be assumed that they disliked being away from the type of culture and society that Cahir represented to the migrant. Therefore, in returning, they would not wish to be agents of radical change since they were making a comparative judgement between "home" and "host" communities and were returning to a society they considered to be superior in serving their needs.

One area where the returnees may act as agents of change is in encouraging future out-migration. According to King (1986,p.24), this

occurs because the returnees are usually well-off by local standards and since the majority of returnees invest their savings in housing and consumer goods, the local community are given the impression that out-migration is a positive move. All of the literature acknowledges the difficulty in quantifying the extent to which return migration is influential in the decision of locals to migrate. In the present study, it was found that return migration was contributing to out-migration at the family level at least. Seventeen per cent of returnees' children had emigrated to the former city/town which had played host to the childrens' parents. Many others of the respondents felt their children could find more suitable employment and would probably be recommending emigration to their children, relatives and friends if the employment situation in the parish did not improve.

Conclusions Although the migrants had been away for a long period of time, they re-integrated quickly and fully into the local community. When integration was assessed through membership in local clubs and societies, the participation rate was found to be high. Few problems were experienced in establishing friendships or achieving a satisfactory relationship with neighbours. Although difficult to quantify, it was implicit from the evidence available that returnees did not wish to bring about radical change. Return migration appears to promote future out-migration at the family level at least.

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