

Time heals? A multi-sited, longitudinal case study on the lived experiences of returnees in Armenia¹

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Introduction

In recent decades, return migration has received increased attention in migration policy and research (Black and Gent 2006; Cassarino 2004; Matrix Insight 2012). Despite previous approaches to return migration as an 'easy', 'natural' or 'unproblematic' homecoming, it is now well recognised that return migration is a multi-phased, multi-layered, long-lasting and complex process and experience, which is sometimes even experienced as more difficult than the initial migration (Black *et al.* 2004; Ghanem 2003; Markowitz and Stefansson 2004). Migrants' post-return experiences are influenced by different elements. Cassarino (2004, 2008) has proposed that differences in post-return experiences can be explained by migrants' 'return preparedness', composed of two elements: first, the free choice of migrants to return, or their *willingness* to return; and second, their *readiness* to return, above all their abilities to collect those resources that are needed to return. Both elements are, according to Cassarino, strongly influenced by circumstances in both the host and the home country. With respect to the first element, the 'willingness' of migrants to return, it is widely recognised that the voluntary or forced nature of migration (in general, not only related to return migration) may influence migrants' psychosocial wellbeing (Bhugra 2004). With regard to return migration in particular, different authors have stressed the importance and centrality of migrants' motives to return, and their agency in the process of deciding whether to return or not – thus, their 'voluntariness' to return, since this may influence returnees' range of options and their rate of success after return (Cassarino 2004), their possibilities of embedding themselves in the society of the country of origin (Ruben *et al.* 2009), and their possibilities of creating feelings of belonging post return (De Bree *et al.* 2010). Yet, researchers have also indicated that there is no strict distinction between forced and voluntary migration; the decision to migrate, or to return, is often 'mixed', and a response to a complex set of factors of both compulsion and choice (Turton 2003; Van Hear *et al.* 2009). Therefore, it is a false assumption that voluntary migration would be a 'safe' form of migration in terms of its consequences for migrants' psychosocial wellbeing (Vathi and Duci 2016).

The second element in Cassarino's model, migrants' 'readiness to return', is said to be dependent on migrants' ability to collect, or their possession of, capital and resources to support this return process. This factor has received support in different studies as being influential in returnees' evaluation of the return experiences and migrants' living conditions after return (Bhugra 2004; Van Meeteren *et al.* 2014).

Next to this focus on returnees' pre-return situation as elaborated by Cassarino, other scholars have looked at the impact of the entire migration experience on how returnees experience their return, since migrants' evaluation of this return experience may depend on their initial migration motives (Constant and Massey 2002). As Van Houte and Davids (2008) indicate, understanding migrants' post-return experiences demands a holistic approach whereby the experiences and living conditions during previous migration phases are considered. Similarly, Gualda and Escriva (2014) stress that previous experiences affect returnees' post return possibilities, resources, and perceptions and evaluations of their living situation.

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Third, returnees' experiences of their return are also influenced by how they manage to reintegrate or readjust in different life domains (Ruben *et al.* 2009). Yet, this reintegration process is strongly influenced by the specific context in the country of origin, and migrants' personal capital and access to resources (Pedersen 2003; Van Meeteren *et al.* 2014). Various interrelated and dynamic impacting factors may be identified here, whereby individual returnees evaluate these factors differently (Gualda and Escriva 2014; Pedersen 2003). First, the ability to establish a secure material base for living is considered a central element in the return experience (Pedersen 2003). Second, migrants' social networks and their reintegration therein may be important resources for receiving emotional support and help to solve problems in the return process, and for an overall greater wellbeing (Ruben *et al.* 2009). However, the supportive effect of social networks seems to be higher for migrants from privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Pedersen 2003), and the inability to meet familial expectations related to the migration process may also hinder a positive return experience (Van Meeteren *et al.* 2014). Finally, returnees' sense of belonging to, or, in contrast, their sense of disconnection with, the country of origin may affect their return experience and wellbeing (Pedersen 2003; Vathi and Duci 2016).

While there seems to be quite extensive knowledge of possible factors impacting returnees' post-return living, most studies use a cross-sectional approach, studying this group at a particular moment in their return process. There are very few longitudinal studies on returnees' living situations. Further, next to the paucity of studies incorporating the dynamic character of return migration, there are few studies that try to capture the complexity of these migration processes (Wright 2011), since most focus on only one or a couple of impact factors. Third, most studies look at returnees' living situations in terms of their economic situation; less attention is paid to returnees' subjective experiences of their return situation and their entire migration process (King *et al.* 2014; Wright 2011).

Looking at the return process as a 'situated concept' framed in particular spaces, events and experiences, we use this contextualised approach to examine returning migrants' wellbeing from a longitudinal perspective. Through an in-depth longitudinal follow-up of the return migration trajectories of four returnees, we aim at capturing the complex interplay between different material, perceptual and relational dimensions of return processes, and at getting insight into returnees' lived realities and their subjective experiences of wellbeing throughout the return process. We put particular emphasis on including a diversity of grades of 'voluntariness' in people's return decisions in our study, given the emphasis this has gained in previous studies (e.g. Long and Oxfeld 2004; Markowitz and Stefansson 2004).

Methods

Study participants

In order to explore how migrants experience their return trajectories and how their wellbeing is shaped throughout the return migration process, this study examined the first two years in the return process of four migrants who were returning from Belgium to Armenia.¹ The respondents were selected out of a larger study, in which we conducted a longitudinal follow-up of 65 migrants who were returning to Georgia and Armenia with support from the Belgian assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programme as provided by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Caritas International. For this study, we chose to select a homogeneous group in terms of their country of origin (Armenia), in order to reduce the heterogeneity in terms of the returning country context.

Armenia is characterised by high emigration rates (Gevorkyan *et al.* 2006), due to, among other reasons, natural disasters, armed conflicts and the socio-political crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Currently, the country is still recovering from the hard years following its independence, and is confronted with a poor socio-economic situation, high poverty levels, unaffordable or unavailable healthcare and unstable political conditions, which are all still important causes of emigration, mainly to Russia, but also to Western Europe and elsewhere (Bakhshinyan 2014; Falkingham 2005). For most migrants, migration to Russia is mainly temporary, while migration to Europe is intended to be permanent. Upon migration to Europe, Armenian emigrants often take their family with them, and the majority ask for asylum. However, asylum recognition rates are very low, and most are not officially allowed to stay permanently (Bakhshinyan 2014).

We purposefully selected four cases that provided a rich account of the return experience and differed widely in their 'willingness to return'. This latter element was identified through looking at returnees' motives to return and whether they perceived their return mainly as compulsion or as choice. Although we acknowledge that the return of migrants with AVRRE support is seldom truly voluntary (Webber 2011), we found important differences in how people themselves labelled their decision to return as a 'voluntary' or a 'forced' decision. The study sample consisted of one single returnee, one couple and two families (two parents with minor children). All of our respondents applied for asylum, but received a negative decision. Given that our research focused on their lived experiences related to their return process, we did not ask for more information about the background of their asylum application. Yet, we talked about their motives to migrate: two respondents migrated to work and to improve their living conditions, one interviewee migrated to get medical treatment that was not available in Armenia, and one respondent left Armenia out of fear for his own and his family's safety due to a conflict with a powerful individual. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

Data collection and analysis

In this study, we interviewed the participants three times: before they returned, so while they were still in Belgium, but had already decided to return; once during the first year after their return to Armenia; and then again during the second year after return. The interviews before return took place in a separate room in the office of Caritas International, after the migrant had signed up for the AVRRE programme. Research aims and conditions of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent were clarified at the beginning of each interview. After the interview, the respondents were asked to reconfirm their willingness to continue their participation and be interviewed again within the first and second years after return. The interviews after return were held at a location chosen by the respondents (once, the interview took place at the office of the local NGO supporting the returnee, twice at the returnee's business place, and five times at the returnee's home). Three interviews were conducted without an interpreter (in French) and the other nine interviews with the support of an Armenian (n=5) or Russian (n=4) interpreter. Although two families with children were part of our sample, we only interviewed adults; in the case of a couple/family, both adults were interviewed together, though each time one person predominantly answered the questions. In the case of the families, this was the father; in the case of the couple, it was the woman. On the rare occasions when differences in perspective emerged between the partners, this will be referred to explicitly. In these semi-structured interviews, we used open-ended questions to ask returnees about their lived experiences regarding their living conditions, wellbeing, migration trajectories and return processes.

All interviews were recorded, literally transcribed and analysed with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, a qualitative research approach for exploratory and detailed examination of how people make sense of life experiences (Smith *et al.* 2009). The IPA method emphasises the detailed analysis of particular cases, with each case as an entity on its own; IPA, therefore, is conducted with small, but purposively homogeneous, samples, so that convergence and divergence can be examined in detail. Following Smith *et al.* (2009), at first we executed a case-by- case analysis. We started with an interpretative reading of the transcribed interviews of the first case, followed by an initial coding process, whereby all text fragments that seemed important to our central research questions were marked and annotated in the text. In a subsequent reading, we noted the general theme to which the text fragment related, which resulted in a thematic grouping of the fragments. Next, we looked for temporal evolutions within the themes and interactions between the different themes. This process was repeated for each respondent, and memos about evolutions and interactions were kept during the case-by- case analysis, to facilitate further comparison. As the final step, we looked for patterns of evolutions and interactions across cases, on which we will elaborate in the discussion section.

Our findings need to be interpreted in the light of some study limitations. First, given its focus on an in-depth exploration of a situated return experience, the country-specific approach and the small research group (n=4), the study sample limits the generalisability of our findings (Van Meeteren *et al.* 2014). Second, the selection of other case studies, even returning with the same support programme to the same country of origin, could have revealed additional or different results. Third, although the involvement of an interpreter was often essential to overcome language barriers, the interpreter–respondent interaction could have impacted respondents' answers (Edwards 1998), and the translations limit the possibilities of making linguistic comments and interpretations during the IPA analysis (Smith *et al.* 2009).

In the next section, we first present respondents' return motives and their plans upon return, which provide insights into their attitudes and feelings about the return, and into their general wellbeing before their departure to the country of origin. Second, we present data from the interviews after migrants' return to Armenia for each respondent separately, as a case study in its own right, in order to do justice to the dynamism of the return experience and the rich data obtained for each participant (Smith *et al.* 2009). In a third section, we look at patterns of evolutions and interactions across cases.

Initiating the return process

At the time of the first interview in Belgium, the respondents had already made the decision to return to Armenia within the framework of the AVR program. During these interviews, it became clear that all respondents were confronted with a gradual deterioration of their overall quality of life in the course of their stay in Belgium, in particular a deteriorating housing and financial situation. They were living with acquaintances or had to leave the asylum centre, were not working and no longer received any financial support.

While Grigor (male, 42 years) found his living situation in Belgium manageable, because he occasionally earned money and could stay with friends, he chose to return because his personal problems in Armenia were solved and he missed his wife and children. In this respect, Grigor's case differed from the other three cases, all of whom had migrated together with their nuclear family. Additionally, due to his previous working experiences in Armenia, Grigor had a clear view

on how he wanted to use the reintegration budget he was allocated, and this made him enthusiastic about the return, and gave him a clear perspective for his future life.

I have experience because I also had an internet café in Armenia before I came to Belgium. I want to open a new one. I am a specialist. I know it will work, it is a good business. [...] It is important, I have to start business, because I have two children, you know.

Davit's (male, 28 years) motivation to return was a combination of many factors and thus rather mixed. The living circumstances in the host country forced him to return: he and his family could no longer stay with his Belgian friend, who had already hosted them for several months, he could not find a job, and his family had no money any more. Yet, he really wanted to return too, since an Armenian friend told him that it was safe to return, and his wife and children felt very unhappy in Belgium, because they missed their wider family and had experienced the life in the asylum centre as very stressful and threatening. His wife's depression, caused by their living situation in Belgium, was a clear push factor to return, though the return decision was framed as a positive choice, because Davit believed that returning would be better for the overall wellbeing of his family. Like Grigor, he had a clear view on his plans after return (cattle breeding), and really hoped he could reclaim his place as a professional sports trainer. During this interview, he stressed that he wanted his return to be a voluntary return.

Narek and Lilit, the remaining two cases, seemed only to be motivated to return because of their living conditions in Belgium. Narek (male, 27 years) and his family applied for asylum several times, and when their lawyer informed them that they had run out of all possible options and had to leave the asylum centre, they decided to return. Once the decision was made, Narek was convinced that buying a car with the reintegration budget was the best option, and would provide the family with an income. The only thing he kept doubting was whether the promised reintegration assistance would indeed be given to him.

Also for Lilit (female, 33 years) and her husband, the financial support they received stopped when their asylum application was rejected. They could no longer pay their rent, and so moved to the house of some friends. However, when they were asked to leave the house, they saw no other option than to return. They were deeply anxious about the return. They had no idea where to live, since they had sold their house before migrating, or how to use their reintegration budget to gain an income. These elements created nervousness and fear of the insecure future they would face after return. These participants thus experienced the return process, and particularly the period between the application and the announcement of the return date, as highly stressful, which further impacted their wellbeing. This was also the case for Davit: his difficulties with the Armenian embassy in obtaining all the necessary documents prolonged the waiting time before he could return, which made him feel powerless and depressed. Both Lilit and Davit expressed feelings of great relief when the moment of their departure arrived.

Longitudinal perspectives on respondents' lived experiences of return

Before the actual return, the respondents were confronted with quite similar living contexts in Belgium, with overall rather limited readiness to return (cf. Cassarino 2004), but still quite divergent outlooks towards their upcoming return. The interviews carried out after their return to the country of origin revealed that respondents' perspectives on the return process differed from their initial views before their return, and continued to change over time. We now present these changes in respondents' lived experiences for the four different case studies.

Declining wellbeing – changing evaluations

Grigor, who was eager to return and had a clear view on what to expect and what to do after his return to Armenia, expressed in the second interview, seven months after his return, that he felt very happy. He had bought six computers and joined a friend's internet café; he was pleased with the way the business was going, and felt very proud to announce that he had found a location for his own business, which he would start in a month. He felt that the return process went smoothly, and he expressed strong feelings of belonging and satisfaction with Armenian cultural habits, such as family, food and festivities.

Everything was normal, I adapted immediately, I was born here you know. I love my country, because this is my country.

Grigor said that he was 'very, very pleased' with the decision to return, and he even regretted his initial migration to Belgium, mainly because of the separation from his family:

I strongly regret that I went there, I would not do it again, I lost two years because of that. It was my big mistake to go there without my family, I should have taken them with me [...] I am happy here, I can live well and I am with my wife and children, so everything is good, everything is normal.

He did not miss Belgium at all, though he was a bit nostalgic about the time he had stayed in Sweden, where he lived with his family for seven years, pointing to elements in the Swedish society that he felt were better than in Belgium.

However, in the third interview, one year and five months after he had returned from Belgium to Armenia, his wellbeing had drastically changed: Grigor now regretted his return, and thought about moving to Sweden. This re-evaluation was mainly due to drastic changes in his personal situation: he had split up with his wife and they now lived separately. Although he still enjoyed running his business, he expressed frustration towards the situation in Armenia, with rising prices, hard work for an insufficient income, and little possibility of improving his standard of living:

I have no house. Even if I work 100 years, I will not be able to buy myself a house here. If I work the same in Europe, I think I can manage.

His previous migration experience influenced him now in a different manner:

[My stay in other countries] has affected me, and I don't want to stay here. I want to leave.

Although he also stated he would always miss his country, the lack of perspectives, and probably also the loss of belonging to a family, made him want to re-migrate to Sweden, where he intended to reapply for asylum. Despite his claim having already been rejected twice (in Sweden and in Belgium), he believed that 'maybe this time, it will be different', as he knew stories from people in a similar situation who did get residence documents.

Return as relief and struggle – ambivalence in the return experience

Davit's return motives before the actual return were rather mixed, and his view on his post-return wellbeing was also quite nuanced. Eight months after his return, he had built a shed and had bought cows, which he considered as a profitable income-generating activity in his particular village, though he was confronted with rising forage prices, making it uncertain whether his investment would bring his family any profit. Further, he experienced difficulties in re-entering

his professional sports career, because of clientelism and because he did not have the 'right' political connections.

Yet, despite the rather difficult adaptation process during the first weeks after having been abroad for five years, and the harsh financial situation, Davit was quite positive regarding his situation. His wife and children were pleased that they were back in their home country, and they felt much more free now, compared with living in the asylum centre or being reliant on friends. This feeling of freedom strongly enhanced their wellbeing.

My son asked me: 'Mum, we do not go to Belgium anymore, do we? Because there, we always have to sit inside the house and we cannot play'. (Davit's wife)

Despite being happy to be back in his homeland, Davit saw little long-term future for him and his family, due to the country's difficult socio-economic situation, the lack of jobs and the corruption and clientelism, which made it hard to reach a normal living standard or any possibility of 'building up' something in life. Also, his perspective on the migration experience was rather ambivalent: on the one hand, he regretted the migration because he considered it a failure, and because he was confronted now with the difficulty of restarting life and regaining a place in his profession. At the same time, he mentioned that he did not regret the migration, 'because I have made good friends, I did sports and was appreciated'. The following quote points to these contradictory experiences regarding his stay abroad:

I lived in extremes there. I saw very good things, but also experienced very bad things, periods when we were really hungry. So my opinion about my stay is very dispersed. Fortunately, I found people there who really helped me.

He still expressed frustration towards 'the Belgian system' that had denied him a residence permit despite his following all the rules. Yet, these personal experiences that evoked a negative perception of his living situation in Belgium before departure were now, after his return, distinct from the overall image he held of Belgium, which he now described as a good and fair country, where he would have liked to stay. Still, the overall evaluation of his migration experience led to the conclusion he would never want to live there again.

During the third interview, a year and a half after his return, his financial situation and general wellbeing had declined, because, despite his continuous efforts, the cattle breeding failed and he still had not regained his professional status as a sports trainer.

Look ... It is just too difficult to live here. I don't even mean to live 'normal', I mean, it is difficult to live 'a little bit normal'. There is corruption everywhere ...

But although his situation had evolved negatively, his perspective towards his migration and return experience had not changed:

Davit: I see everybody leaving from Armenia [...]

Interviewer: You would like to go to another country as well?

Davit: Me? No, no! For me, it is finished leaving, 'fini partir'! I left, then I came back here, and then after two or three months leave again? No, no, I'll stay here. Where would I go? Papers [residence permit] are a big problem for me, I would not be able to work.

He still felt that he had been influenced by the migration experience, as it had changed certain attitudes (being more punctual, for instance), yet this only evoked frustration and irritation in the daily confrontation with the 'non-European' Armenian approach to daily life, and particularly the way services and (equal) treatment were (not) provided to people.

An unexpected appreciation of life in the home country

Narek and his family returned when all possible options to prolong their stay in Belgium were exhausted. Yet, once the decision to return was made, Narek had a clear view on what to do after return. Immediately after return, he bought a car and restarted his work in the distribution of goods to shops. At the same time, he renovated one floor of his father's house, in which they lived, yet he kept on dreaming of buying land and building his own house in the future. Although Narek had expressed limited willingness to return, he described their return as 'coming home'. After his return, he felt that during his stay abroad, he had missed things that had happened in his family, and thus felt happy being back. Moreover, as Davit also did, Narek expressed how he regained the possibility of living a social and active life, and he liked the comfortable feeling of being in his own country: 'The return was the right solution for us, if you stay in your own country, it is worth millions', in contrast with 'feeling stressed as foreigner abroad'. This image of his return and his home country largely differed from how he described both elements in the interview before his departure. Furthermore, these positive feelings had an explicitly positive impact on his wife's mental health as well:

It was awfully difficult in Belgium. My wife lost two babies there. This was because of the stress, she had nothing to do there all the time, she could not do anything. Now she is back, and we are not going to the doctor, she hasn't got these problems anymore.

The difficult migration experience and positive return experience influenced Narek's overall view about migration: he regretted his migration, the loss of time with his family, and the loss of money that he could have used much better in Armenia. He therefore stated that he would never go abroad again:

Sincerely not. Even if I would know there was a job in Russia or in some European country and I would be paid 5,000 euro, I would not go. God knows. It is right that you are in your country with your family and you have to work as hard as you can and not run after the money.

One year later, Narek had made steps in extending his activities, improved his income and renovated his living place. Realising this (albeit limited) progress resulted in increased feelings of wellbeing and an unchanged evaluation of his return and migration experience: 'It changes slowly, but it does improve. I just have to be patient and work hard'.

Improving wellbeing – changing evaluations

Finally, also for Lilit and her husband the return decision was made because of external push factors, and before their departure, they had no idea how to manage life once they returned. During the second interview, Lilit was really nervous and depressed, and expressed deep desperation with their living situation. The couple had solved their housing problem through moving in with Lilit's mother (who had not migrated and still lived in her house in a village), but the quality of the house was very bad (no sanitation or kitchen). Further, Lilit explained how she was confronted with inaccessible and unaffordable healthcare, while both her husband and mother were sick, and the impossibility of finding a job. She described their return as 'their only choice' at that moment, though she now largely regretted this decision:

In Belgium, we were advised to go to other countries, but we could not, we had no money, the only option for us was to return. But now we have returned, and we are very, very disappointed, because there is no law, and our state, our government, is just making a massacre, a genocide. It is a nowadays genocide. Now I have returned, and I face a lot of problems here, to whom can I address myself? I will ask the president, what can you do for

me? How can I take care of my sick mother, sick husband? Ok, let's say that Belgium has provided 500 euro for medical support, it is finished. What will I do afterwards? Whose toilet to clean in order to earn a little money? I have an education but how can I earn money in order to take care of them and to come out of the situation?

Her image of Belgium remained very positive, and she mainly stressed the huge difference between the two countries in how both doctors and officials treat you.

During the third interview, the couple's wellbeing had increased remarkably. Seeing no prospects in the village where they were living, they moved to Armenia's capital, and although they were still confronted with a difficult financial situation, Lilit was working. Although the job was temporary, being able to work strongly improved her wellbeing, made her feel proud, and gave her feelings of agency to change her situation. With regard to the decision to return, the opinions of the couple differed: Lilit's husband said he would like to migrate again, since it was so difficult to find work in Armenia, and given that he had lived half of his life abroad, he felt unfamiliar with the Armenian context. He considered it to have been his wife's decision to return to Armenia. Lilit, on the contrary, still considered their return as the only possible option at that moment:

When people are surprised that we returned after eight years, I explain it was impossible to stay there, because it was not legal, that's all. They often ask: Couldn't you go to live in another European country? But no, never. I am tired of it, you have to change your whole life, and then restart in another country.

Like Grigor and Davit, they still felt the huge impact of their migration experience in their current lives; yet, in contrast, they described it as something positive:

By our nature, we are very honest people, so while living in Belgium, no matter how bad it was or how difficult the living conditions were, we always followed the rules. It was like this in Belgium, and now we are continuing in the same way here in Armenia.

Again, the difference between Armenia and Belgium was stressed, though they also noticed a certain adjustment to the Armenian context:

Here in Armenia, there is a lot of 'mal-education'. Bus and taxi drivers for example use very bad language. In the beginning, I was really stressed by that, but now I am used to it again [laughs].

Cross-cutting themes in changing perspectives

Across the different cases, the evolutions and changes found in the post-return situations of the respondents stressed the dynamic character of the return migration and reintegration processes, confirming that return is not only a stage within a possible ongoing migration cycle, but an ongoing process in itself. The return process and respondents' post-return situations clearly influenced their evaluation of their overall wellbeing. Throughout these four stories, both deterioration and improvement in returnees' wellbeing could be found at different times, as well as rather ambivalent evaluations of their wellbeing, since the return to the country of origin often entailed elements of both hardship and satisfaction. Clearly, migrants' perspectives on their return decisions and experiences also evolved over time – illustrated by the stories of Narek, Lilit and Grigor. In each of these cases, the changes in perspective on the return experiences were strongly linked to changes in their post-return situations and overall wellbeing, whether it was an improvement of their psychosocial wellbeing (Narek: between the situation before return and one year after return; Lilit: between the first and the second year after return) or a decline (Grigor: between the first and the second year after return). This supports Pedersen's (2003) statement

that the everyday life-situations and the meanings that returnees themselves attribute to their situation strongly affect how migrants experience their return, illustrating that past experiences are always remembered and interpreted in light of the present (Eastmond 2007).

In accordance with these changes in perspective on the return experience, the respondents' stories also exposed the importance of the broader migration experience within the return process (Gualda and Escriva 2014; Van Houte and Davids 2008), and how their perspectives on, and the impact of, these migration experiences differ for each individual, even within the same family (cf. Lilit and her husband). The experiences of Narek and Davit convinced both that they would never migrate again, evoking the feeling that their return was the 'right' decision for them; yet Narek regretted the migration, while Davit did not, and Davit's story illustrated how a migration process can be experienced as very ambiguous (Cornish *et al.* 1999; Ghanem 2003; King and Christou 2010). Their migration experiences also influenced their perception of the home country: for Narek, his experiences in Belgium led to a higher appreciation of his life in Armenia; for Davit, they created a more nuanced view on life in Europe – as being positive, though unreachable without a residence permit. In contrast, Grigor's story showed how his previous migration experience in Sweden, in combination with declining current wellbeing, made him long to migrate again. Even so, during the first interview after return, his view on his migration experience was countered by a strong feeling of belonging to his country of origin. These evolutions illustrate how the meaning of places can change over time (Levitt and Rajaram 2013) and under the influence of migration experiences and changes in post-return living situations. The stories also illustrated that locality matters, given the fact that the place to which people return influences their options (cf. Davit) or how the change in place of living, from the village to the city, opens new perspectives (cf. Lilit).

Further, the stories of Lilit and Davit showed that they recalled a positive image of the host country, despite their personal difficulties and harsh experiences in Belgium (Kubal 2015). This shows that returnees' views on the migration process can become detached from personal experiences, and can lead to an 'idealisation' of the migration experience and how well everything functioned abroad (Pedersen 2003). This is analogous to how researchers describe an idealization of the home country on the part of migrants abroad (Cornish *et al.* 1999; Markowitz and Stefansson 2004; Warner 1994). Our respondents described how their attitudes changed under the influence of their migration experiences, and their view on 'how things are done in Belgium' became a 'moral touchstone', a 'frame of reference', contrasting with the difficulties and injustices they were confronted with in their country of origin (Levitt and Rajaram 2013; Pedersen 2003). Lilit described this as something positive, making her a better person; though for Davit, it led to frustration when confronted with the disjuncture between both places and the clash between his changed mentality and the post-return reality (Pedersen 2003).

Finally, the stories were less consistent about the continuing influences of the migration experiences. While, on the one hand, the experience seemed to have a continued importance for and understanding of life in the home country (Pedersen 2003; Storti 2001), Lilit, on the other hand, pointed to its decreasing influence and the fact that she gradually 'became Armenian again'.

Conclusion

This study explored the dynamics of migrants' return experiences in a multi-sited, longitudinal research project on returnees' lived experiences of their return from Belgium to Armenia in the framework of a governmental assisted voluntary return and reintegration programme. We hereby

captured the meaning these returnees attach to their return experiences and the dynamic interplay between the different dimensions in the return trajectories, in particular in relation to their pre-departure living situation and views.

Based on a detailed reading of these cases, four concluding points can be made. First, the findings confirmed the value of Cassarino's (2004) theory of return preparedness, in particular the importance of migrants' willingness and readiness to return. It appeared that when returnees had a clear view of their likely post-return living situation while they were still in the host country, the return process went more easily. It provided returnees with a sort of 'orientation' immediately after return, which positively influenced their wellbeing in the first year after the relocation. These ideas about the possible direction in life after returning depended on the specific work experience of the returnee or his/ her locality of return (e.g. cattle breeding as the only possibility for making investments in a village).

However, throughout these returnees' stories, some nuances about the influence of returnees' willingness can also be seen. As time passed, the opportunities or obstacles created by the specific living context in the country of origin became more prevalent. The respondents' stories indicated that their evaluation of the return experience depended more on their post-return situation and wellbeing than on the initial degree of willingness to return, a hypothesis that, given the specific and limited group of returnees and the relatively small variation in their initial willingness to return, needs further exploration. The respondents' willingness to return did influence their perception of the return process, though this changed over time and in relation to the fluctuations in their post-return situations. This observation adds to the argument that more willingness to return will not automatically simplify the return and reintegration process. This, in turn, reinforces the need to avoid the false dichotomy between forced and voluntary return (Turton 2003; Van Hear *et al.* 2009; Vathi and Duci 2016). The renegotiation of return experiences in the light of post-return living situations and previous migration experiences shows how migrants' views of their return experiences can be seen as performative acts (Butler 1993), through which decisions, belonging and the meaning of places and experiences can be reinterpreted and relocated into personal biographies (King and Christou 2010) in order to rationalise and cope with apparent contradictions and make sense of the return experience (Cornish *et al.* 1999; Eastmond 2007).

Second, and related to the first element, our findings stress how the different factors described in the literature as impacting returnees' post-return living situations and their wellbeing post return are indeed important, but they strongly interact and influence each other. This supports the need for a holistic approach when analysing how returnees experience their return (Ghanem 2003; Gualda and Escriva 2014; Van Houte and Davids 2008).

Third, the study illustrates how return migration can influence returned migrants' wellbeing, though in a very diversified way, as the stories showed how return improves as well as decreases returnees' wellbeing. Migrants' wellbeing also played a role in people's decisions to return, as explicitly shown in Davit's story; and, as illustrated in all four stories, the respondents' post-return Wellbeing impacted their views of their return and the entire migration experience. Yet, this association between wellbeing and return migration is often also mediated by other factors, such as the returnee's evaluation of his/her return experience or returnees' resilience, individual values and priorities.

Finally, the multiple changes in the lived experiences of the returnees suggest the necessity of incorporating a temporal dimension into the study of return experiences (Levitt and Rajaram

2013). These four case studies were not exceptional in the wider study sample of 65 returnees, and their stories relate to the stories and perspectives of many others. Yet, the multiple factors that influence return experiences, and their strong interaction, highlight the necessity to be cautious with generalisations about returnees (Ackermann 2003; Gualda and Escriva 2014). Therefore, returnees' complex subjectivities entail a valuable analytic power (Lawson 2000), and qualitative and longitudinal approaches are necessary to enable understanding of the multiplicity of return experiences and returnees' wellbeing.

These conclusions, based on returnees' lived experiences, carry important policy implications for AVRR programmes supporting the return process of these migrants. First, the results indicate the importance of support during the return process, both before leaving the host country and after returning to the country of origin. Guidance given before the return may help returnees to reflect upon their readiness and willingness to return, and might give them a clearer orientation about what to do immediately after return. Both elements may help to bridge the often difficult initial period immediately after the return and may also positively influence their wellbeing once they have returned. Even so, the dynamic character of return migration, reintegration processes and returnees' post-return situations indicates that support for returnees needs to be available over a longer period of time, if needed and asked for by the returnee and/or his or her family.

Second, AVRR programmes are generally designed with the overall aim of facilitating 'sustainable return', mostly defined as the definite stay of returnees in their home country and, thus, the absence of re-migration (Cassarino 2008; Matrix Insight 2012). Yet, the strong influence of the living contexts in the country of origin after return, and the fact that AVRR programmes only focus on short-term support for individual returnees, without targeting the broader contexts in which they are implemented (Schuster and Majidi 2005), render this focus on the 'sustainability' of return an unrealistic goal. We thus need to rethink these AVRR programmes' goals, and therefore argue for more flexible and less stringent programmes that can be more closely aligned to returnees' specific needs and desires and to the particular contexts in which they are implemented.

Note

1. The data collection for this case study and for the larger longitudinal follow-up study was conducted by the first author as part of her PhD (see Lietaert 2016).

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