ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Middle-aged migrants: Expanding an understanding of lifecourses and linked lives

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Abstract

This paper explores a new perspective on middle-aged migrant women. Midlife has long been presumed to be the most networked stage of life for sedentary populations, but it has not been examined critically in the context of migration. This is an empty space that warrants research attention, because middle-aged migrants often have lives that are temporally and spatially distinctive. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Latvia and the United Kingdom (2018–2023), I argue that the lifecourses of middle-aged migrant women resemble the transitions that young people go through for work but differ in terms of care. Although strong ties relatives and friends have long been thought to be key for transnational care relations, weak ties also become instrumental through shared notions of self-actualization in midlife. I provide a novel understanding of how the concepts of linked lives and networks can be applied to processes that are pertinent to middle-aged women.

KEYWORDS
lifecourse, linked lives, middle-aged migrants, networks, self-actualization

INTRODUCTION

Lifecourses are not individual processes; instead, they are fundamentally shaped by the lives of others. According to the most widely accepted definition of linked lives, an individual's life is rooted in the lives of family members, including those from other generations (Elder, 1994; Elder et al. 2003). The concept of linked lives is therefore also crucial for lifecourse studies involving migration in which people migrate with family members or to family members (Bailey et al.,

2004; Findlay et al., 2015; see also Stockdale et al., 2013, for a discussion of the internal migration of middle-aged women). This paper expands on the theoretical potential of midlife research in the context of migration by asking: How do networks shape the linked lives of middle-aged migrant women? This paper argues that linked lives specifically reconfigure the domains of work, care (especially familial care) and self-actualization as a relational phenomenon and a matter of social agency. These three domains are crucial for middle aged people and serve to reveal more nuanced linked lives than has usually been presumed.

There are, however, certain gaps in this area which must be addressed. First, research into midlife trends tends to treat middle-aged people as sedentary (e.g. Barrett, 2005; Mahler, 2011; Moen, 2003). Second, multidirectional care for children, life partners and parents is specific to the midlife stage, but it has rarely been studied explicitly as coinciding with the lifecourse transitions of migrants. Third, work and self-actualization are relevant to current theories about youth transitions (Arnett, 2001). Theories about youth transition, however, remain limited by the common assumption that people become adults once they complete their education, find stable work and establish a family and a home. The term self-actualization in this paper is understood as a psychosocial quest to find oneself not just individually, but also in places and spaces where social agency can be strengthened. Middle-aged migrant experiences challenge this assumption, because for migrants, transition can occur well into adulthood because of the spatial rupturing of work and family ties. Middle-aged people seek self-actualization differently because of altering temporal horizons (Amrith, 2022, 2023). They have often worked, built careers and established families and homes. Temporal horizons in midlife offer vantage points which allow people to assess their achievements and their aspirations. Meanwhile, migration shapes a non-linear lifecourse in a profound manner (Hörschelmann, 2011). When people reach middle age, their social connections to families, former schoolmates, colleagues at work, neighbours and acquaintances become saturated in place (as implied, but not explicitly theorized geographically, cf. Lachmann, 2001; Moen, 2003). Migration, however, disrupts well-developed networks and demands the creation of new links. This means that methodological tools are necessary to examine how social networks can help to build new linked lives or renew those that were ruptured because of migration (see Stockdale et al., 2013 in the case of internal migration). This, however, can be different when people migrate at the international level. In addition to which the domains of intense work, care and relationships (cf. Lachmann, 2001) must be viewed through the lens of transnational networks and disruptions in previous relationships. In this paper, I will work through these gaps to demonstrate distinctively linked lives among middle-aged women who are pursuing work, care and self-actualization.

The remainder of the paper outlines the way in which the concepts of linked lives and social networks apply specifically to middle-aged migrants. I argue that middle-aged migrant connections can be explained within broader societal contexts, with previous local and temporal experiences played out in the lifecourses of my research cohort. I have drawn upon theories about migration, networks and individualization so as to examine personal growth and desire for change and self-actualization. I link these theoretical insights to lifecourses as well as consider the highly gendered dimensions of midlife migration. The linked lives of research participants emerged and developed within specific historical periods and contexts and at particular turning points. Along with my explanation of data and methods, I discuss this in a sub-section on methodology. The empirical sections are based on long-term observation. These sections reveal the subjectivities of research participants in terms of what they achieved in life and how they networked over time and space. My broader observations are presented via selected stories that demonstrate how linked lives have shaped work, care, as well as self-actualization in the context of migration. These vignettes cover the whole cycle of migration, including returning home. The final section summarizes the primary contributions towards an understanding of the subjectivities of midlife migration and the role of social networks in the linked lives of middle-aged migrant women.

LINKED LIVES AND NETWORK TIES

Literature focused on midlife transitions argues that work-life balances can be destabilized by work-role transitions (Mahler, 2011). This means that moving to a new job, combining or changing work schedules due to other

responsibilities, such as care, can be a challenging feature of midlife. Literature about migration, in turn, suggests that some middle-aged migrants often move into unfamiliar linguistic spaces and face more difficulties learning the language compared to migrant youth. This situation leaves them with narrower options and may result in deskilling (e.g. Lulle, 2018a; Lulle & King, 2016 on Latvian women working in low-paid jobs obtained through relatives or friends, despite their education and skills). We also know that employers in certain industries such as domestic work, care and agriculture prefer middle-aged and older people as temporary workers because they can be 'better controlled' and are people who either need to return to their families or whose visas end, requiring them to leave the country (Amrith, 2022; Andall, 2013; Lulle, 2014). Linked lives as intergenerational relations and social networks are crucial when migrants make decisions (Haug, 2008) and when seeking integration with 'locals' (Eve, 2010). Social networks can produce job offers but also serve as barriers against higher earnings, particularly if the network overlaps with ethnic enclaves.

However, there is a gap in our understanding of how the linked lives and networks of middle-aged migrants specifically affect their ability to find or change jobs along with care needs during migration or upon returning home. Qualitative social network theories offer appropriate tools to investigate linked lives as embedded in multigenerational relationships or linked to acquaintances (Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021). Granovetter (1973) posited the famous theory that acquaintances and distant friends or schoolmates (weak ties) are more instrumental in finding a job than is the case with close relatives (strong ties). These common assumptions about the role of weak and strong ties in job seeking and the work-life balance may not, however, be universal across the range of lifecourses. Of particular usefulness in this regard is the distinction which Ryan (2011, 2016) drew between horizontal and vertical weak ties in the process of migration. For midlife people, networked migration and return are distinctly facilitated by acquaintances who have been identified at school, former places of employment or neighbours, for example. These are horizontal ties, which usually lead to certain jobs and places during migration where a similar socio-demographic profile of migrant can be found. Access to individual jobs, however, is more often facilitated by vertical weak ties. A person who is an employer or recruiter and who might be known only via a string of acquaintances or brief encounters can offer a job. Indeed, empirical research suggests that strong ties and care morph together with job-seeking and migration in midlife. Sons and fathers, for instance, may help each other to find a job abroad (Telve, 2019). Middle-aged grandmothers from Russia combine care trips with temporary employment and self-actualization in Finland (Tiaynen-Qadir, 2016). In both cases, care and jobs are fused through the linked lives of migrants.

The mid-lifecourse distinctly involves care responsibilities and crises such as divorce or illness (Peterson & Kiesinger, 2019). However, more empirical investigation is needed into how these events relate to migration and linked lives with a more specific focus on the type of tie that helps resolve care issues. It is clear that midlife experiences are sharply gendered (Barrett, 2005; Perrig-Chiello & Perren, 2005). Women make up the largest share of caregivers, and this often means sacrificing careers of their own. Living abroad as a divorcée adds additional care challenges which usually involve physical togetherness (Katz & Monk, 1993; Ryan, 2007). Hence, an enquiry into specific ties can nuance our understanding of how transnational networks affect the synchronization of lifecourses (Bailey, 2009; see Coe, 2016 on gendered nature of care synchronization).

There has been little research so far about how self-actualization motivates midlife migrants to migrate (but see Cvajner, 2019; King et al., 2017; Lulle, 2018b). What we know from this research is that migrant women regularly worried about losing themselves at work, at home and in care routines but rejoiced when they found themselves psychosocially and sexually when moving abroad. Self-actualization enabled them to act as capable persons of achieving that which institutionalizes ideas of a good lifecourse for middle-aged people. Moving abroad was thus motivated by finding and redefining one's self, with a desire to break away from linked lives. In this sense, middle-aged people differ from young people, where work is the key to self-actualization (cf. Lulle et al., 2022). Midlife migrants, in contrast, often seek to exploit existing ties at work and, potentially, to recreate new and stronger ties (i.e. new partners and acquaintances). Here the gap I want to address emerges. It is important to note that midlife involves ideas about individualism so as to claim one's own life and, possibly, to experiment with new relationships (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Individualism serves to assert one's worth and agency (Gecas, 2003; Gullette, 2016) and to become

less engaged in hands-on care for growing children and kinship networks (Curran & Estela Rivero-Fuentes, 2003). This means that self-actualization among midlife migrants relates to linked lives, but in a counterintuitive manner. The neoliberal cultural suggestion is that care duties and embeddedness in intergenerational care oppress the individual. However, these ideas of individualization flow through networks (both strong and weak ties) while also reconfiguring new and old ties. Much less is known about how middle-aged migrant women access opportunities for growth and generativity, as highlighted in demographic literature about the middle-aged (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001 p. 11). Recent anthropological ethnographies point towards socially significant and experiential ways in which people dynamically redefine age through intergenerational relations and responsibilities (Hawkins & Haapio-Kirk, 2023).

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The lives of Latvian migrant women in this study were shaped by the socialist system and the turmoil of the post-socialist era. These women obtained their education and began establishing careers and families before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This collapse and the move from Socialism to capitalism were crucial external factors for lifecourse ruptures in Eastern Europe (Mayer, 2004). After the collapse of the USSR, 'adultification' became a distinct feature in post-socialist lifecourses (cf. Burton, 2007). Stagnation during the latter period of the Soviet Union meant that young people embraced work and entrepreneurial opportunities as early as possible. This means that people in the generation whom I have studied became hard-working adults when they were still young.

There is widespread emigration from Latvia today. Since the country joined the European Union in 2004, at least 20% of the population has left or is circulating transnationally (Central Statistical Bureau [CSB], 2023). The advent of the free movement of labour in the EU coincided with the midlife of the research participants in this study. Mothers of teenage or adult children switched to youthful migration lifestyles. It was common to change jobs and to live precariously with other migrant acquaintances into one's 40s and beyond (Engbersen et al., 2010; Lulle, 2021).

My long-term research tracked Latvians who emigrated during midlife (some of whom have since returned home). Diverse network ties and practices help to discern what I call midlife migrants. Data for this paper came from research involving middle-aged Latvian women in the United Kingdom, with multi-site fieldwork in Latvia and the United Kingdom between 2018 and 2022. I have known several of these women for more than a decade, and I have maintained long-term research relationships from previous research encounters. Data gathering methods included observation, repeated face-to-face conversations and online and recorded interviews.

The combination of midlife and migration can require considerable empathy and trust on the part of the researcher and her or his participants, because these two topics have seldom been brought together. Opening up to a researcher about things that society overlooks can lead to vulnerability. An assumption might be that middle-aged people are sedentary or that their migration involves no problems. This cannot be taken for granted. I am a middle-aged woman and my extended relationships with research participants helped them to know me, share our positionalities vis à vis lifecourse and migration and allow them to realize that I am trustworthy.

The context of each life story stretched across several decades, whereas my research took place over the course of a decade (Joshi, 2023). For this reason, I particularly focused on temporalities when gathering and interpreting the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The names and personal details of research participants have been completely anonymized. I have also altered a few details in those cases when participants talked about deeply intimate experiences; these changes have not affected the analytical process. All interviews were given with explicit consent. I double-checked my anonymization with the participants. The process of transcribing and re-listening to audio recordings helped me to refine my approach to the empirical data. These audio versions conveyed emphasis and sonic modalities, thus indicating the importance of links between various social network strategies. The transcribed and audio versions both helped me to appreciate the significant turning points and networks that relate to midlife narrations (Gardner, 2002; Potter, 2020). The transcribed texts were encoded by defining the dominant role of social networks in each individual interview. Once this was done, unifying themes began to emerge. Participants spoke about

three types of social network: work, care and family and self-actualization, although these social network strategies are intertwined.

The second level of coding focused on weak and strong ties and how their social location – vertical or horizontal – shape the migration experience. This special focus on migration helped to elicit the relevance of temporality and transnational spaces in the life stories of the participants. Their social network practices, care arrangements and access to and maintenance of networks for self-actualization were shaped by historical temporalities in Latvia and the United Kingdom. I encoded the dynamic social ties of lifecourse as collectively recognizable, or as personal or community-based.

The data presented below are based on portrayal analysis and ego network analysis (Ryan, 2021; Tran, 2022). These approaches centre on the narrators and track their explanations of how and with whom they are related in the areas of work, family and care and self-actualization. I will now present four stories that offer understanding of the network dynamics that were fairly typical in many interviews. These cases illuminate the nuances of research participants' specific subjectivities that were used to make sense of their experiences and decisions within their linked lives across borders. Participants discussed migration during their mid-30s, 40s or 50s, as well as their transnational return to Latvia.

THE SEARCH FOR SELF: BREAKING FROM CAREER AND CARE OBLIGATIONS

Inita moved to the United Kingdom when she was 34 and childless. She earned two degrees in Latvia, had a prominent job in the civil service, and was responsible for taking care of her extended family's properties. I interviewed Inita twice in the United Kingdom when she was in her late 40s. This story depicts migration and social networks in the early midlife transition. Early midlife borders the youth transitions but is distinctly marked by adulthood, where social networks are different (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Inita was very busy in Latvia: 'From age 18 to 33 I had an extremely busy life. It was turmoil, a roller coaster, non-stop work and study and all kinds of activities'. She had a broad range of weak ties, both horizontally, as acquaintances, and vertically, knowing people in power positions. Inita was politically active and her work and private life overlapped because there was so much to do in rebuilding a rapidly changing post-socialist Latvia. Eventually, though, Inita had had enough when it came to her strong and extended family ties, which involved the obligation of caring for several properties. 'There were wounds from Soviet-era persecutions and longings for the status which people had back in the Soviet times', she said, describing the previous intergenerationally linked life. 'Wounds' is a telling emic expression about strong ties and is collectively recognized by many people in Latvia. Inita's strong ties in her extended family were hurt both by the Soviet occupation and by the privatization of properties during the 1990s along with the material gains and losses it entailed. Inita hoped for a clean break by becoming a migrant: 'I left everything – my job, my volunteer activities, a large house, family … everything'. She moved to London to the house of a Latvian acquaintance (a horizontal weak tie), and eventually fell in love (a new strong tie). During the first year, Inita lived on the basis of 'new love', by which she meant her financial savings and new relationships. She savoured the ability to be completely away from her linked life in Latvia. Youth transition theorists might see Inita's transition as rooted in establishing her own family abroad (Arnett, 2001). However, it took a few years for her to establish a new home. Interpretation through the lens of youth lifecourse transitions fails to account for Inita's previous career, which was established, demanding and reputable. She said that she was 'simply tired' of her job and of taking care of her extended family's properties, which involved psychosocial relations, as linked lives do.

Inita transitioned from a stable career to precarious short-term assignments as a nanny for Latvian acquaintances. She got this job via weak horizontal ties so as to earn some money during her mid-30s. Parutis (2014) has described similar initial experiences for young migrants in the United Kingdom from the perspective of migrant job quality: The first step is to get any job. This experience demonstrates spatial, social and temporal pluralities of lifecourse that do not fit in with hegemonic ideas of the institutionalized lifecourses of youth transitioning to a stable adult life (Hörschelmann, 2011). Extant theories would consider Inita's 'yo-yo' transitions to be a deviation from the standard move from

school to stable work (Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2003). Inita described this transition in this way: 'It took me more than a year to unlearn the rhythms of a very busy life and the tremendous dynamics of being active all the time'. Inita studied English in order to find a better job: 'A boyfriend came with me to a college in England to fill in the paper-work. All of the other students were considerably younger than me'. Here Inita used her new strong tie, the boyfriend who already knew the British system and was fluent in English. Importantly, this temporal strong tie was used for self-actualization, for which she needed the cultural capital of language skills. However, Inita did not form relevant weak ties with other students in college because, as she emphasized, their lifecourse experiences were dissimilar due to the age difference. A few years later Inita separated from her boyfriend and met her future husband. She remembered feelings of infantilization in her late-30s because of her limited language skills: 'While I was already speaking English, I still had quite a lot of anxiety'. But there were many better jobs in London, and Inita was prepared to put her broad port-folio of skills to use. She planned to work with plants and as a decorator, as well as driving around the United Kingdom: 'My husband came with me to a work interview. He spoke on my behalf', she recalled. Inita did not get a job because of weak ties (a typical theoretical assumption, Granovetter, 1973), but instead due to a formal process that was facil-itated by her intimate partner, the strong tie, who acted as translator. This is in line with findings from migration and ageing literature that family members abroad often facilitate jobs for middle-aged and ageing relatives (Lulle, 2018b, 2021).

Inita planned to remain in London, perhaps for good. She had raised two children. Once her children became teenagers and no longer required continuous hands-on care, Inita refocused on her strong ties in Latvia and the weak ties that she had with the community of Latvians in England: 'For the past three years or so I have felt the urge to reconnect. After many years [of deliberate distance from family links], we spent summers in Latvia and stayed with my brother. I felt that I wanted to study again'. She interlinked two processes in this quote: renewal of strong ties transnationally and a renewed sense of personal growth through education. Inita's positioning in midlife in psychoso-cial and pragmatic terms pulled her back to the linked life that she had in Latvia. During her late 40s, she again nurtured links with her brother so as to transmit familial links to children and begin untangling her links with her parents, aunts and uncles (who are now either deceased or frail). This was what had previously overwhelmed her and was the basis of her radical choice to leave it all behind. Hence, attention to midlife reveals dynamic aspects of intergenerational and transnational links over time. In early midlife she prioritized and utilized her position as a childcare-free person to move away from the extended family but later re-evaluated the importance of the linked life for the sake of the younger generation, that is Inita's children.

MIDLIFE WORK TRANSITION

I have known Renate for more than a decade; she was in her late 50s when I conducted my last interview with her. Renate has two children. She had a vocational education and later also completed higher education in her 40s. Renate had intermittent jobs in the United Kingdom for about 20 years, eventually returning to Latvia, although she occasionally travelled back to the United Kingdom to handle live-in care jobs.

Renate first left Latvia when her children were 13 or 14 years old and found work as a nanny through acquain-tances (weak vertical ties) in England. Renate's ex-husband offered no financial support, so she reactivated her strong ties with her mother, who stepped in to look after her grandchildren. Both women trusted that the children would manage, but Renate's mother kept an eye on their affairs. The linked lives of middle-aged migrants are implicit in care chain literature on female migration (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Duncan & Smith, 2002; Hochschild, 2000; Kofman & Raghuram, 2015; Parreñas, 2001; Raghuram, 2012). These authors have suggested that women (as well as some men) negotiate care across distances, and family members or other carers step in to provide hands-on care on behalf of those who have departed to find care-related work. In case of Latvia, it is usually the mother or other close female rel-ative who looks after a middle-aged migrant woman's children. Serving as a nanny for a rich family in London earned some income and, more importantly, helped Renate learn English and explore the city. 'I put a map on a stroller and

went for walks every day', she remembered. Renate regained confidence after her divorce. She returned to her own children after a year and enrolled in a flexible university programme.

Both works experience abroad and pursuing a university degree as self-actualization made Renate more confident, but once she was back in Latvia, she noted: 'My courage dipped'. Via a Latvian acquaintance, a horizontal weak tie, Renate found another relatively well-paid factory job, this time in Ireland. Her migration was based on her desire to build her psychosocial confidence and save money for her children's education. The migration culture and infrastructure were so well-developed that Renate could co-ordinate with other workers and superiors (horizontal and vertical weak ties) to step in for her each month when she needed to go back to Latvia to check on her children and to take university exams. When the financial crisis hit Ireland in 2009, Renate immediately lost her job. She renewed contacts with former acquaintances from a vocational school that she had attended in her youth and got a job in England via weak horizontal ties which transnationally extended from her school days in Latvia to work in the United Kingdom.

Once the children were of age, Renate financed their studies abroad and purchased two flats in her hometown. 'One for me, the other for rental income', she said. Her income therefore went on care, what midlife theories call the task of generativity (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001) and to secure her own place and future income. She was economically prepared to return home for good, but target-earner theories, which predict that people return when they have achieved their target (e.g. Piore, 1979), do not explain what happened next:

> I tried to return completely. I tried. I was working in a café [in a Latvian town], depressed, down, menopause, gloomy life. An acquaintance came in one day and asked why I was torturing myself. She offered me a job in England. I barely knew the woman. She had helped me with English lessons the first time I went to London. Our children are in the same age group, and she is slightly older than me.

The meeting with this 'barely known' acquaintance turned out to be important. The weak vertical tie was of the greatest importance in finding a new suitable job psychosocially and making her midlife transnational again. This confirms Ryan's (2011, 2016) argument that vertical ties, specifically the social location of the acquaintance, are important in finding a more suitable job. Apart from this, the two women intersubjectively shared the feelings which Renate was experiencing. Menopause was still silenced and even stigmatized in Latvia (cf. DeLyser & Shaw, 2013), but over the course of the years, I found that research participants who had lived in the United Kingdom were prepared to talk about these midlife bodily transitions more openly and actively. This was clearly linked to activism and to commercial discourse in the United Kingdom. Menopause is vividly discussed in the media, on podcasts, in television documentaries (McCall, 2021) and among colleagues at work. Government discussions occur on workplace policies (UK Parliament, 2022). For Renate, these broader discourses created an emancipatory context in her encounter with the woman who offered her a job.

Both women had ensured the education of their children, who were now in early adulthood. Both had worked abroad. The acquaintance was a recruiter who organized temporary in-house elder care jobs in England. The pay was relatively good by Latvian standards. Renate could work for 1 month and then spend the next month in Latvia. This satisfied her psychosocial midlife needs better than would have been the case if she fully relocated to the United Kingdom, where she did not have strong ties, or if she had stayed in Latvia. 'My self-esteem returned', she emphasized, as the main gain from the transnational life and new job. Meanwhile, Renate's acquaintance was recruiting women of a similar age through collective recognition of the generational and gendered experience of midlife. Such ties usually target middle-aged and older migrants and are commonly activated through social networks related to care jobs (Andall, 2013).

STRONG TIES OVER TIME

I want to further specify the dynamic aspects of weak and strong ties through another vignette. Aiva, whom I have also known for more than a decade, was the one who offered Renate a temporary job in the United Kingdom after

Renate lost her job in Ireland. Aiva had worked in the United Kingdom for about 15 years and had a British partner, she was 54 the last time I interviewed her. Aiva had a vocational education and was the mother of two. She returned to Latvia when she was 53. Aiva first moved to England during her late 30s, making use of weak horizontal ties in the form of contacts from a vocational school (the same school Renate had attended), from which she had graduated nearly two decades before. In the United Kingdom, Aiva utilized her geographical and social location and invited her children (strong ties) to join her for temporary jobs. Aiva's ageing mother was relatively strong and lived in Latvia. Aiva regularly sent remittances to her, maintaining linked life care values transnationally. In the interview, Aiva described a turning point in her relationship with her home: 'For all those years I thought and said out loud that I didn't like Latvia, I hated it. But around five years [before her return to Latvia], my feelings started to change. Latvia is my home. That's what I felt'. The change did not occur in a vacuum; it was lifecourse-related intergenerationally, because Aiva's children were about to establish their own families back in Latvia. Furthermore, a sense of change passed through her networks of similar-age migrant women (weak horizontal ties) who were contemplating a return or had already returned as part of a network. Aiva and her son bought some land to build a family home for him and a smaller one for her in Latvia. The proximity made sense, because Aiva's mother was growing older and physically weaker. As her caring roles via strong ties changed, Aiva became disillusioned with her British partner and his extended family:

> They would never accept me as a family member. There were his kids, and then there were mine. Whenever we talked with his family, somebody would say something along the lines of "I don't understand what you are talking about". No matter how hard I tried to learn the language, there were always reasons why I was different.

This quote does not mean that Aiva felt a general lack of fluency in English. What she did emphasize was how hard or even impossible it was to become embedded in her new family and make that tie emotionally strong. New and strong ties were difficult to establish because of cultural differences, and ultimately they ruptured (Hosnedlová, 2017). In the main, it was the Latvian cultural environment and her children as strong ties that pulled Aiva back home, she said. However, the sense of strong ties and belonging was amplified through her weak horizontal ties to acquaintances who were also contemplating return migration. Information via networks from similar-age acquaintances showed those who had returned home in midlife. Acquaintances shared practical advice about doing so. Therefore, Aiva's strong ties with the intergenerational family cannot be the only reason to explain the return decision. As in Amrith's (2022) work, middle-aged migrant women reach a temporal horizon in their lifecourse when they reassess where to go and what to do next. Although, in Amrith's (2022) research, such temporalities are related to visa restrictions in Asia, my research shows that there can be lifecourse factors specific to midlife migrants.

TIES TO MIGRATION AND RETURNING HOME

Raita was in her mid-40s when she and her husband moved to the United Kingdom. Raita got married and had a child when she was 19. She had spent her whole life in a small Latvian town. After school she worked as a seamstress for a couple of years. Later on, when Raita was looking after her child and hopping from one job to another to combine childcare, she felt lost: 'To be honest, there were just not many available jobs in [town]. One shop opened, another closed. Some years the local school wanted teaching assistants, other years they just wanted a cleaner'. These limited job opportunities were interlinked with weak ties in a small town. Accordingly, Raita's early adulthood and youth traditions (Arnett, 2001) were largely shaped by the fact of her having a child and of her spatial circumstances. Raita herself was young, Latvia was undergoing much turbulence while moving from the planned Soviet economy to capitalism, and economic opportunities in a small and remote town were vanishing. The main jobs in the region where Raita lived were similar to those in many other parts of Latvia during the 1990s and 2000s: forestry work, which was seen as a job for men. Raita's husband worked in the forest earning enough money for a family of three. But there was never enough

money to buy a flat or build a house, which was their dream. Raita said that owning a home would represent a good life, which aligns with the theoretical meaning of adult independence. According to youth transition theories, Raita had what could be called an incomplete transition to work and her own home, because the work patterns were reversed and interrupted (Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2003). The most important factor in explaining Raita's trajectories and migration decisions was of a socio-spatial nature, that is the lack of the opportunity to earn money and buy a home (cf. Hörschelmann, 2011, for a discussion of spatiality in lifecourses). This desire for a home was strongly influenced by hegemonic ideas about the appearance of an independent and middle-class adulthood (Lulle, 2023). The couple's earning levels and lack of affordable properties in their hometown prevented them from realizing their dream and this specific lifecourse transition. The couple separated.

Regarding the rupture of this strong tie, Raita said that she and her husband divorced mainly because of her dissatisfaction with her living conditions. Raita's child was at school and was preparing to study in the capital city. Then life took another twist. Raita was still in her small town and saw her ex-husband almost every day. They drew closer once again and decided to live together. The strong tie was repaired. They had another child and found an unfinished building that had been partially built during the late Soviet period, that is the late 1980s. After Latvia regained independence in 1991, the building was abandoned. The couple came up with the plan of moving to the United Kingdom and working for 5 years, after which they would have enough money to fix the place up. The United Kingdom was still in the EU at the time and its border regime was fairly free. Raita and her husband needed to embark on transnational mobility in order to achieve the stability which they had so long wanted at their specific lifecourse stage.

Raita's husband went first and found a job in construction. She joined him 6 months later after finding a suitable job in the town where her husband was working. The job was at a sewing factory, which meant that Raita was transitioning back to her profession, albeit in a different country. Raita's small child stayed with her mother because the couple never intended to stay in the UK permanently. As noted, their primary purpose was to earn money and bring all of it home to build their house. The care involved the strong tie with Raita's mother. However, weak ties back in Latvia weakened. 'It was neither easy nor pleasant', Raita recalled. 'People were talking behind my back, saying that I was an egoist who placed money above my child'. There are strongly rooted public discourses which are taken for granted in terms of the idea that midlife is a time for care, stability and generativity (Lanchmann, 2001). Raita's experience, however, shows that these are largely middle-class ideas and discourses. What is overlooked here or kept quiet is the fact that transitions to an independent life and one's own home are more pluralistic and precarious. The couple took turns in returning to Latvia to visit their child. 'Not a single month went by when we were not home for a weekend, either me or my husband', Raita said. She also told her boss in the United Kingdom that she would need to visit Latvia often. Here she used a weak vertical tie with her employer to organize her care travels. Raita was bringing back interior goods to decorate her new home, a self-expression and achievement related to her own house. One of her husband's acquaintances also worked in construction and had returned to Latvia (weak ties through his work in the United Kingdom), and the couple paid him to finish the work on their house.

In terms of work and home transitions, the couple achieved what theorists call transitions to adulthood (Arnett, 2001). Raita quickly climbed the career ladder in the United Kingdom, rapidly progressing from a simple factory job to one as a supervisor and then a unit manager. Most of the workers at the factory were from Eastern Europe, and Raita proudly told me that she improved her English language skills but also learned conversational Polish, which was more necessary at her place of work. 'We befriended a Polish couple about our age', Raita recalled. 'They also had two children in Poland and were also building a house'. Hence, Raita established new weak horizontal ties facilitated by similar lifecourses. Most middle-aged migrants struggle to make friendships abroad, according to my observations, but their lifecourses were comparable in terms of midlife positionality and the desire to have their own home. Raita said that the two couples promised to each other that as soon as their homes were ready, they would leave England for good: 'We were very surprised after a year back in Latvia to find that they had returned to Poland, but then, according to a Facebook post, they had moved back to England'. A second return to the United Kingdom was common to migrants from Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe (White, 2014). Individual, social and spatial factors shape the trajectory of a future in ways that have not always been aspirational. The Latvian couple came home, or at least Raita did so

for good, as she said during our last interview. Raita took a job at a local shop. A former classmate from school told her about the vacancy, access to work again involving weak horizontal ties. Raita did not regret leaving the job for which she had trained in the United Kingdom. It was never her true calling. Raita's completed transition and safety in midlife were in line with Gullette's (2016) narrative analysis of progress stories. The point for Raita was to get her own house and home, which would not have been possible without significantly higher income transnationally. Her husband continued to engage in transnational work, but in a different network. Established male work networks between the town where the couple were living and a Nordic country led to a construction job there. 'He is used to being away at work for several months and then being at home again', Raita said. 'I'm used to him being away'. Their strong tie was maintained partly transnationally, demonstrating how migration can change intimacy patterns (cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). For Raita, the home, which she decorated, represented self-actualization.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper focuses on midlife, which is a distinct period in one's lifecourse, punctuated by changes in the life transitions and linked lives of migrants. I have examined middle-aged migrant women, who represent an often overlooked group. My aim was to expand the theoretical and practical application of the concept of linked lives through network analysis and attention to specific ties used by migrants for work, care and self-actualization.

The key argument stemming from the research is as follows: The trifocal lens focusing on midlife, migration and linked lives enriches our understanding of lifecourse transitions and social network ties. The lifecourse transitions of the middle-aged women I researched, resemble youth transitions to work and, often, to establish their own homes, although they are different in terms of care. Women reoriented care networks that are stretched across borders. Usually, a mother or other close female relative – strong intergenerational ties such as these, or siblings – step in to help with care for migrant woman's children. However, my research also revealed that weak ties are instrumental for care needs. This became visible in transnational settings. Bosses (weak vertical ties) help with work organization so that a mother can visit her child more often. Co-workers (weak horizontal ties) also organize work shifts so that a carer can travel. These findings enrich Ryan's (2011, 2016) network analysis by adding work on care and linked lives.

Middle-aged migrant women combined weak and strong ties when networking for work (cf. Granovetter, 1973). Former classmates, work colleagues and, more importantly, women of a comparable age, offered personal support to one another, helping to create cultural spaces in which midlife difficulties and opportunities could be discussed and understood. Former classmates and colleagues – horizontal weak ties – helped in finding a job, but vertical weak ties (bosses and people in more powerful positions) helped to access better jobs abroad (Ryan, 2011, 2016). Furthermore, this paper challenges the assumption that 'yo-yo' transitions are exclusively a matter for young people (cf. Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2003). Midlife migration transitions display radical 'yo-yoing' and reversed transitions as the women who were part of the study bounced from stable to precarious trajectories in the labour market. Such factors further complicate the positive effects of social networks in getting a job, thus also pointing to the inequalities of midlife.

Midlife is often marked by the establishment of new strong ties (such as a spousal relationship), and these to change alongside pre-existing strong ties in another country. Middle-aged migrants often take fairly radical steps that rupture linked lives. Indeed, networks tend to be quite saturated in midlife (as implied in demographic and sociological theories about lifecourse; see, e.g. Lanchmann, 2001). Disruptions in work and care networks are most fundamentally linked to the quest for self-actualization, a psychosocial idea that says it is worth rupturing existing networks in one place radically so as to achieve a new sense of self. Some of the participants whom I interviewed over the course of the years emigrated as couples, but the majority experienced ruptures in their strong ties, as presented in the stories told above.

In terms of the broader set of interviews for this research, during early midlife (mid-to-late 30s, although ages did differ), migration was often motivated by a willingness to get away from busy and established lives. From the perspective of established lives after the youth transitions (Arnett, 2001), it is a rather sweeping decision to break away

from existing networks in place, both at home and at work. This breaking away from 'home' was facilitated by existing networks abroad – someone to visit and to observe as that person lived their life elsewhere. Cultural acceptance of migration and widespread information about migrant culture which flows through networks of acquaintances have served to facilitate migration not only among young people, but also in midlife. A quest for self-actualization and a break from routine care and work links were common in the stories that migrants told. However, in most cases, middle-aged migration also led to reorganization of existing strong ties. These insights show how desired changes can be achieved through migration while also expanding upon the current idea that people in midlife are sedentary (Barrett, 2005; Mahler, 2011).

Major ruptures of strong ties can motivate departure. In this case, there were dominant ideas of individualization and of fluid partnerships. These respondents were further encouraged by lifecourse turning points (e.g. when women were less dependent on kinship networks and had less of a need to provide hands-on care for their children). Mid-lifecourse as such creates windows of opportunity where women can claim self-actualization and break away from stable networks and intensely close-knit and place-based lives. This research, therefore, adds a relevant nuance in terms of presenting the idea of linked lives. Like networks, linked lives can feel suffocating, and links can rupture (Hosnedlová, 2017). Further long-term research or in-depth life story investigation is needed to reveal the ways in which new links and networks are created in places of immigration and transnationally, or upon one's return from such places.

When it comes to self-actualization, middle-aged women distinctively claimed their need to seek and find their selves as an integral part of migration. This idea of self-actualization is rooted in individualization, which advocates moving away from dependence upon and (gendered) subordination to others in linked lives (cf. Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). As I have shown, self-actualization is in fact networked and relational (see also Gecas, 2003). In other words, people in midlife generate self-actualization via weak horizontal ties of acquaintances who have moved abroad, returned or engaged in transnational circulation. This means that self-actualization practices warrant further research in the area of linked lives and strong ties that are shaped not only by intergenerational embeddedness but also by cultural ideas about individualization and an existing willingness to reorient relationships with others through migration.

Finally, the focus on networks illuminated the importance of house and home (i.e. a property) as a significant vector that shapes midlife, migration and linked lives. Further studies on midlife mobilities can nuance linkages between specific strong and weak ties and broad geographical and psychosocial meanings and practices of home.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data cannot be shared in a public repository due to privacy/ethical considerations.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/glob.12483.

ETHICS STATEMENT

I followed the ethics guidelines and policies by the University of Eastern Finland as well as the ethics guidelines by Riga Stradiņš University.

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