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# Imagery and imaginary of islander identity: Older people and migration in Irish small-island communities

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## ABSTRACT

Keywords:
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This article examines the imagery and imaginaries of islander identity and makes an original contribution to the fields of gerontology and nissology. Drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews with 19 older residents of two small-island communities located off the island of Ireland, we address the central roles played by older people in creating and sustaining islander identities. Reflecting both public and private representations of islander identity, the article contrasts an island 'imagery' with an island 'imaginary', resulting in a complex 'imag(in)ery' of islander identity. We explore three main themes. To what extent do older residents of island communities perceive an 'imag(in)ery' of islander identity? In what ways do older islanders contribute to, substantiate or perpetuate the imag(in)ery of the islander identity? Are there alternative imag(in)eries of the islander identity for different groups of older people who live in island communities? Our analysis identified two imag(in)eries of islander identity. An historical islander identity was structured by the shared hardships and enforced self-sufficiency associated with residence in remote communities. Contemporary islander identities are founded on the positively perceived isolation of islands, an historical and cultural sense of belonging, frequent social interaction within cohesive, safe and secure communities, and a persistence of 'traditional' values. Older people were actively engaged in the (re)production of islander identity, such as helping visitors discover their island origins, producing traditional cultural artefacts, passing knowledge of culture down through the generations, and acting to maintain the civic life of the island community. Knowledge of local and traditional skills imbued some older islanders with the ability to perform island-specific symbolic rituals. Our study revealed subtle forms of differentiation between over-arching categories of island residents based on migration histories. In particular, older people's narratives revealed a hierarchy in relation to claims to islander status.

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## 1. Introduction

Around the coast of the island of Ireland are 365 small islands. However, over the years there has been a decline in the number that are inhabited and at present only 53 have resident populations (Moncada et al., 2010). Islands are characterised by emigration and immigration, but migrational flows need to be balanced to ensure population stability (Connell and King, 1999). As migrational flows represent a necessary characteristic of islands, the construction of islander identity is likely to shift continually and be recreated. Nevertheless, Hay (2006) suggests that 'enough remains constant for the island to persist' (p.24). In this exploratory article, we argue that older people play a crucial role in the creation and

sustainability of islander identities. Furthermore, to date, their contributions and experiences as islanders have been overlooked in both the fields of gerontology and nissology Fig. 1.[1]

This article examines the imagery and imaginaries of islander identity using symbolic interactionism within an ecological framework. We explore the (re)constructions of islander identity and the influence of this identity on people's actions who are 'performing the islander' (adapted from Woods, 2011, p.200). Any collective memory or past must be understood in relation to other such pasts. Therefore, those who were born and raised on islands are likely to construct islander identity differently from migrants who bring different perspectives or gazes to bear — just as differences have been found between the identities of long-term and more recent rural residents in other rural settings (Winterton and

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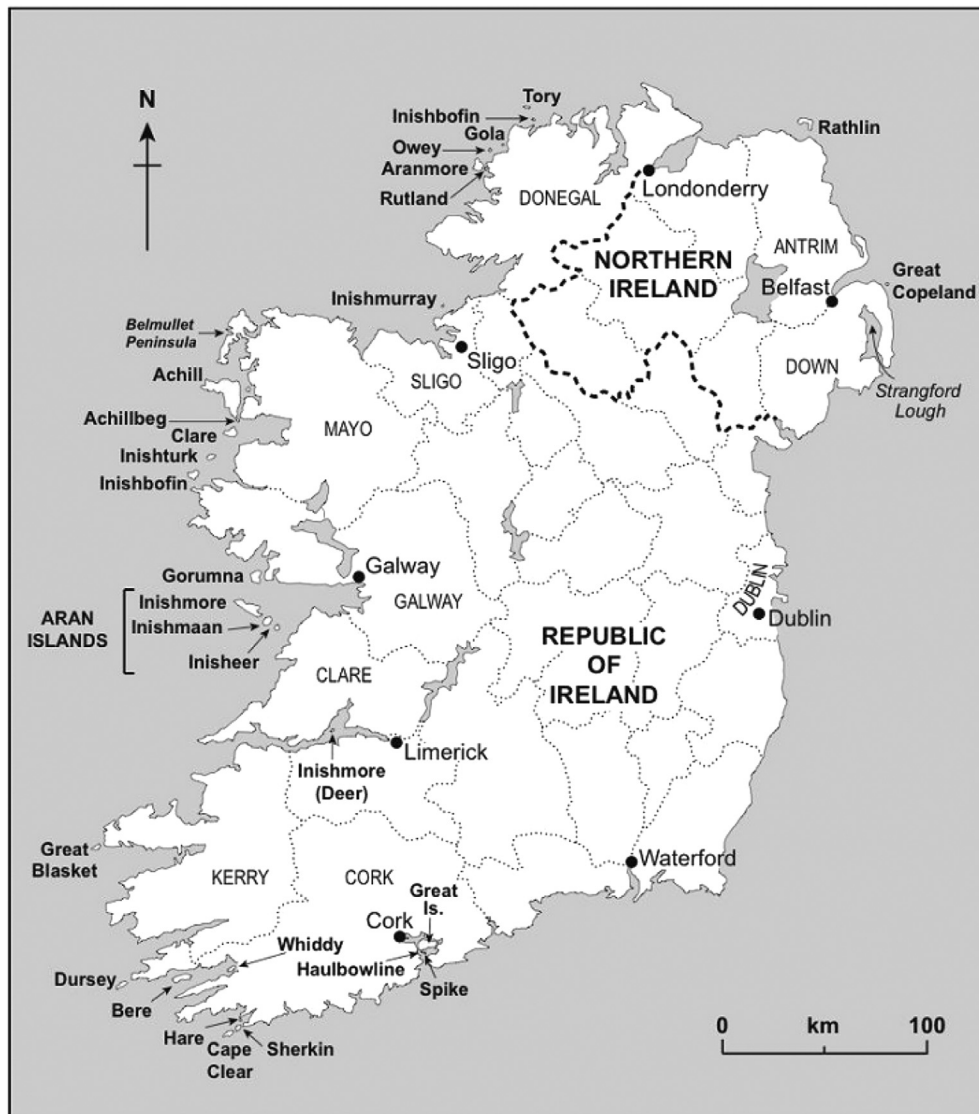[1] The study of islands (McCall, 1994; Hay, 2006).

**Fig. 1.** Map of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland showing the location of small islands. Reproduced by permission (Royle, 2008).

Warburton, 2012). Islander identities will be institutionalised in interlinked practices, ideas, artefacts, behaviours and values. We will attempt to identify the dominant ideology with regard to islander identity and look for evidence of where this is supported and perpetuated, transformed, superficially adopted or rejected. Thus, we will explore the degree to which older islanders are 'integrated into consensual ways of thinking and behaving' (Wright, 1992, p.214). In particular, we contrast the public presentations or descriptions of islander identity – the island 'imagery' – with personal and private conceptualisations of islander identity – the island 'imaginary'. We use the term imag(in)ery to encapsulate both public and private representations of islander identity. This article explores three main themes:

1. To what extent do older residents of island communities perceive an 'imag(in)ery' of islander identity?
2. In what ways do older islanders contribute to, substantiate or perpetuate the imag(in)ery of the islander identity?
3. Are there alternative imag(in)eries of the islander identity for different groups of older people who live in island communities?

Two theoretical positions (critical human ecology and symbolic interactionism) provide us with the grounds to argue that older people may play an important role in the construction of Irish islanders' identity. From the critical human ecology perspective, place, policy and practice fundamentally impact on the ageing experience, whilst simultaneously individuals shape or adapt their environments (Keating and Phillips, 2008). Our second perspective illustrates the co-production of islander identity and islander behaviour. According to Mead (1934), the construction and continual reconstruction of an islander identity would require members of the community to be reflexive and have a shared understanding of community norms, structures and practices. Thus, we conceptualise islander identity as a set of social norms to which some people adhere (Cloke and Milbourne, 1992; Fast and de Jong Gierveld, 2008). Examining the way that people interact in their everyday lives provides us with a method of understanding the differential impact and interpretation of the social construction of islander identity on the beliefs and behaviours of older islanders.

Some authors suggest that the physical boundaries, geographical isolation and compact socio-political universe of islands contribute to the social construction of an islander identity or

community as different or unique and separate from those found elsewhere (Anderson, 2003; Weale, 1991, 1992). Whereas the boundary of a rural mainland community may be indistinct and perceived differently from one person to another (Burholt, 2006; Winterton and Warburton, 2012), it is well-defined on a small island, symbolised in its coastline, and clearly delineates who is a member of the island community and who is not. In this respect we use the term 'community' to refer to the group of people who reside within the physical island territory.

However, this is not to say the boundary of a small island is impermeable. In an age when 'there is no culture in the world that can be said to be fixed and bounded, separate from other cultures' (Gillis, 2004, p.118), small islands may be more accurately defined by connectedness: an external connectedness that is necessary to ensure that the territory does not become impoverished, unsustainable, economically unviable and uninhabitable (Baldacchino, 2000, 2005; Bertram and Watters, 1986). In the face of globalisation, there is pressure to conform to family, religious, social and economic structures found elsewhere, and, it has been argued, a tendency towards homogenisation of cultures. On a theoretical level, the potential for homogenisation of cultures implies that 'community' may be undifferentiated instead of diverse (Mannarini and Fedi, 2009). However, social sciences generally agree that communities are socially constructed and differentiated by the degree to which a member feels a sense of belonging (Hyde and Chavis, 2007). As noted earlier, islands are characterised by out- and in-migration. Thus, the islander identity is continually renegotiated in light of the changing constituent members of the community. In this article, we search for shared narratives that define 'belonging' to the island community. We investigate how these narratives are internalised by older people and contribute to a sense of social belonging and islander identity (Mankowski and Rappaport, 1995).

Twentieth Century Irish island literature emanating from residents or visitors has provided testament to the rich culture of the small Irish islands (e.g. O'Donnell, 1927, 1975; O'Flaherty, 1932; O'Sullivan, 1953; Sayers, 1974; Synge, 1907). However, processes of modernisation and globalisation have been associated with a decline in traditional forms of economic production on Irish islands (Royle, 2008). Moreover, the out-migration of young people coupled with in-migration of return migrants (retired older islanders) and off-islander retirement migrants can lead to an imbalanced ageing population structure. Historically, Irish islands have undergone dramatic population changes characterised by permanent out-migration. In some cases, this has resulted in complete depopulation, rendering some islands unviable for habitation (Table 1). Sometimes the departure of the last inhabitants is dramatic; for example, the last boat of residents and their belongings leaving the Great Blaskets in 1953 (Royle, 1989). More often, the process is gradual with residency becoming increasingly problematic until it is intolerable; such as the depopulation of Gola, County Donegal, in the 1960s (Aalen and Brody, 1969). In the case of gradual depopulation, the remaining population may have an older age profile (Royle, 1989; Moncada et al., 2010).

There has been some resurgence in populations of some Irish islands that have embraced tourism (e.g. Tory), whilst others have continued to decline (e.g. Inishturk). Although some islands are able to develop industries that may support the island community (e.g. aquaculture on Clare Island, County Mayo), others may lack the resources to do this (Royle, 2008). Ultimately, in order to survive, small islands have to adapt their economies and communities in the modern world (Royle, 1999b). In turn, community adaptation may impact on islander identity and island sustainability. These transformations in economy, culture and community are likely to be applicable to other cold-water small islands elsewhere in the world.

In the case of the Irish islands, particular pressures to conform to the norms of the mainland with administrative responsibility may co-exist with competing demands to retain an island's uniqueness. With regard to the latter, seasonal or permanent migrants may be seeking unique qualities of islands for escapism, retreat, peace, quiet and solitude or a type of social order and community life either experienced earlier in the life course or imagined. Tourist economies, which many small islands have now become, may also exert internal pressure to maintain an island's social and cultural identity. Therefore, one method of halting the depopulation of small islands is to ensure a flow of migrants with new ideas, investment and entrepreneurship (Courchene, 1995). However, islanders may be acutely aware that if the island community loses its distinctiveness then its future with regards to in-migration may be jeopardised. Hay (2006) notes, 'if islands do remain special places, it is because the characteristics that endow space with the shared meanings [...] may be more pronounced, better articulated, and more effectively defended on islands than is usually the case

**Table 1**
Population of the islands comprising founding members of *Comhdháil na nOileaán (Federation of Irish Islands)* from 1841 to 2006.[a]

| Island | 1841 | 1871 | 1901 | 1926 | 1951 | 1971 | 1981 | 1991 | 2002 | 2006 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rathlin (Northern Ireland) | 1010[b] | 413[b] | 368[b] | 299[b] | 196[b] | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | 103[c] |
| Tory | 399 | 343 | 335 | 250 | 257 | 273 | 208 | 119 | 133 | 142 |
| Inishbofin (Co Donegal) | 121 | 125 | 150 | 120 | n/a | 103 | 46 | 3 | n/a | 36 |
| Aranmore | 1431 | 1174 | 1308 | 1390 | 1249 | 773 | 803 | 596 | 534 | 529 |
| Clare | 1615 | 494 | 490 | 378 | 278 | 168 | 127 | 140 | 127 | 194 |
| Inishturk | 577 | 112 | 135 | 101 | 123 | 83 | 76 | 78 | n/a | 10 |
| Inishbiggle | 67 | 154 | 135 | 162 | 123 | 112 | 89 | 51 | n/a | 24 |
| Inishbofin (Co Galway) | 121 | 125 | 150 | 540 | 291 | 236 | 195 | 181 | 178 | 199 |
| Inishmore | 2592 | 2110 | 1768 | 1363 | 1016 | 864 | 891 | 836 | 831 | 824 |
| Inishmaan | 473 | 433 | 420 | 380 | 361 | 319 | 238 | 216 | 187 | 154 |
| Inisheer | 456 | 495 | 480 | 409 | 388 | 31 | 239 | 270 | 262 | 247 |
| Dursey | 48 | 197 | 205 | 162 | 96 | 38 | 19 | 20 | n/a | 8[d] |
| Bere | 2122 | 1125 | 1059 | 1182 | 534 | 288 | 252 | 216 | 207 | 210[d] |
| Whiddy | 729 | n/a | 259 | 215 | 104 | 111 | 54 | 34 | n/a | 17[d] |
| Sherkin | 1131 | 452 | 50 | 248 | 146 | 82 | 70 | 93 | 129 | 106 |
| Cape Clear | 1052 | 572 | 601 | 453 | 237 | 192 | 164 | 132 | 129 | 125[d] |

[a] Small area population statistics for the 2011 census in Ireland and Northern Ireland were not available at the time of writing this paper.
[b] Estimates, source Elwood (1968).
[c] This figure was supplied by the Rathlin Island Development Community Association on 25-05-11. Official census data are not available at this small-area level. The figure is based on the number of '*true islanders*' on Rathlin, which refers to residents who are entitled to an 'island pass' (discounted ferry travel) and who reside on the island for at least nine months of the year.
[d] Approximate only.

elsewhere' (p.34). Consequently, there may be a mutual vested interest in (re)creating an identity through social interaction that symbolically homogenises the island population (islanders and migrants) as a traditional and socially cohesive community, retaining its distinctiveness from the mainland and/or other islands. However, Cohen (1985) suggests that 'this homogeneity may be merely superficial, a similarity of surface, a veneer which masks real and significant differences at a deeper level' (p.44).

The rural idyll – the pastoral myth of Western literature in which rural life is portrayed as bucolic and virtuous – has its historical roots in classical representations of the countryside (e.g. Virgil 42–37BC (Short, 1991)). Likewise, a similar idyll of rural paradise or Utopia is applied to islands (Hay, 2006; Royle, 2001). However, there is a counterpoint to the island Utopia in the representation of islands as 'prisons' both literally (e.g. Alcatraz, US; Devil's Island, French Guyana; Spike Island, Ireland), and metaphorically. Metaphorically, islands can represent backwardness,[2] irrelevance and anti-social self-indulgence (Hay, 2006; McCall, 1996). Similarly to the dichotomous representation of islands as prison or paradise, there are debates contesting the nature of islanders with regard to vulnerability versus resilience (Baldacchino, 2005; Briguglio, 1995; Hay, 2006), and victims of change and casualties of neo-colonialism versus independent entrepreneurs and resourcefulness in the face of such threats (Hay, 2006).

One of the positive attributes often ascribed to islands is a strong sense of community and social cohesion. Some scholars suggest that the geographic boundedness of islands results in a 'powerful sense of community – of communal home – dictated by geography' (Hay, 2006, p.21). Islands portraying a strong sense of social cohesion may also be perceived as a 'safe haven' and free from violence and crime (Royle, 1997, 2001). These 'traditional' characteristics represent the antithesis of the modern urban-industrial society and may be particularly attractive to in-migrants (Royle, 2001). This phenomenon could also be observed in the United Kingdom (UK) from the 1930s until the 1970s, when coastal resorts held a certain charm for retirement migrants, and the seaside upheld 'an image of health, safety and moral rectitude, contrasting with the increasingly shabby suburbs of the manufacturing towns' (Blaikie, 1997, p.640). Although the small island may have superseded the coastal resort as a retirement destination encompassing 'safety and moral rectitude', some authors suggest that the resulting transformation in community structure contributes to changes in status and power and 'shifts away from cultural roles rooted in traditional belief systems towards new economic and social roles' (Dunn, 1998, p.58; see also Binkley, 1996; Marshall, 2001).

In this article, we explore the construction of islander identity on two of the 16 founder members islands of Comhdháil na nOileaán (Federation of the Islands of Ireland) identified in Table 1. We explore whether older people are the agents of 'articulation' and instrumental in the (re)creation of an islander identity. Furthermore, we explore whether migration compounds or modifies the social representation of the difference/uniqueness of the islander identity when compared to others (Baldacchino, 2005) and to what extent the public imagery matches private representations or the imaginery(s) of islander identity.

## 2. Methods

The paper addresses its research questions by adopting a qualitative case-study methodology. The benefit of this approach is that it assists in developing an understanding of the experiences of

individuals living in real-life complex rural contexts (Luck et al., 2006). Our approach was informed by ecological multi-level analysis (Thrift, 1999), encompassing the levels of the individual, the community and external macro-level factors. In this way, we sought to acknowledge the multiple forces surrounding place, policy and practice that may influence the ageing experience and the construction of islander identity.

### 2.1. Case-study sites

The selection of the two case-study islands, which will be referred to as Island A and Island B, was based on a desire to achieve a geographic spread across the island of Ireland and to focus on small-island populations of under 250 people. The selection was also opportunistic: based on contacts and information provided by the research team's network of rural stakeholders and social care practitioners. The islands were not in Gaeltacht regions and therefore English was the spoken language. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, the islands are not identified in this article and only outline details of the two settings are provided.

Island A, has a slightly younger population than Island B: 17 per cent of the population on Island A are over 65 years of age and 31 per cent of the population on Island B are over 60 or 65 years (for women and men respectively). The populations of Islands A and B are primarily native, but new residents have moved to both islands, with retirement migration particularly evident on Island B. Both islands are situated approximately 11 km off the mainland and are between 60 and 100 km from the nearest large urban centre with accident and emergency care. Other services, such as retail outlets, supermarkets and general practitioner (GP) clinics, are in closer proximity (within 25 km). The islands have only one small shop each and rely on 24-h community nurses for health and social care provision. There is a primary school on each island, but children attend secondary school on the mainland, returning home at weekends. The development patterns of the two islands are similar with electricity, piped water and regular ferry services (2–3 times a day) introduced within the last 30 years. Both sites were traditionally reliant on farming and fishing. Today, small-scale land and marine agricultural production is still evident, but summer tourism forms the primary basis of the islands' economies. As a result, additional accommodation and places to eat, although mostly seasonal, have been opened and holiday homes have either been built or converted from older dwellings.

### 2.2. Interviews and sample

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with older people (aged 60 years or more) on the two islands. Interviews followed a life-course perspective, which is considered beneficial for exploring links between identity, place and attachment (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2005). Participants were asked about: their daily lives and participation in the community; their residence history on the islands; social, cultural and economic changes on the islands; community characteristics and social cohesion; interpersonal relationships; and place attachment. Nineteen older interview participants were recruited with the assistance of key community stakeholders (including community association members, public health representatives and local volunteers). The participants were selected based on their willingness and ability to give informed consent to participate in the research. Seven older people from Island A, ranging in age from 69 to 91 years, took part in the study. This group included three men and four women who were all native to the community, including one return migrant. Twelve older people were recruited

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from Island B, ranging in age from 64 to 87 years. This group included four men and eight women, six of whom were not native to the island (four of these individuals were retirement migrants) and one of whom was a return migrant. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the NUI Galway research ethics committee.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. NVivo 7 was used to code the data and support the analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2003) was used to provide insightful interpretations into the experience of living on an island, anchoring these interpretations into the participants' accounts of islander identity and migration. The analysis focused on meaning and contextuality (i.e. what was distinct in each interview), but also balanced this against experiences and meanings that were shared across groups.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. The historical imag(in)ery of islander identity

#### 3.1.1. Coping with hardship
Older islanders who had been born and brought up on the island presented an historical imag(in)ery of island identity that was replete with hardship yet socially connected. Older islanders' narratives highlighted the remoteness of the island from the mainland, which was exacerbated by poor transport links to the mainland. Weather permitting, transport from both islands was restricted to a once or twice weekly open-boat service. Any trips taken to the mainland differentiated the islanders from off-islanders, not least because of their attire when alighting:

*"That's how we were living just thirty odd years ago and you were sitting out in the open boat and sometimes you'd get a tarpaulin to put around you. And it might be a lovely sunny day and you'd be dressed up in these oilskins. Oh God, and you'd go over to the mainland and people would be out in these lovely little T-shirts and… and these pretty dresses, sun dresses, and we'd be coming out of the boat in these big oilskins and us soaking wet, you know and everybody…looking at us, you know. But eh, you had to do it because it may be rough in the middle or something and you got wet."* (Female, 64)

Historically, the poor transport links to the mainland had an impact on the education of children living on the islands. On completion of primary education, children would either leave school and start work, or they would be sent away to boarding school on the mainland only returning to the island and their families three times a year (summer, autumn and Christmas). In the accounts of older people, it was apparent that this was an important feature earlier in their lives, either as pupils or as parents when they had to send their own children away for schooling.

Although education had a significant impact on the lives of older people, it was the lack of utilities in the past that was frequently mentioned by older islanders. Respondents referred to having to collect fresh water and fuel, and working by candlelight:

*"We had generators and then I mean when I was a child […], when we progressed to a Tilley lamp it was fantastic, and then you went to the gas and that was great, then you went to the generator and then, sure you couldn't have it on during the day or anything. If you wanted an iron on you had to turn everything else off, god it was hard. And then electricity was great."* (Female, 65)

On both islands, family survival entailed combining a mixture of farming and fishing. Island families tried to be self-sufficient whilst generating a small amount of income to purchase items that were only available on the mainland:

*"Well we, of course in them days, everybody was self sufficient… And everybody had their own cattle, their own milk, their own butter, made their own bread. And they eh…they never needed for nothing… And then you got eh…you had to…like, you'd till the land… You sowed your potatoes; you sowed your mangles[3] and your turnips. And you had to let, you had to let one area for the cattle, to keep them grazing. And then you had another, another piece of land left for, for the hay […], for the winter. And […] you'd go fishing then…in April, May, June, July and August. And you had to try and make enough money then, to tide you over for the winter."* (Female, 76)

There were few cars on the islands as these had to be brought over from the mainland on a boat balanced on two planks. This meant that most islanders walked and consequently would interact socially on a regular basis. Furthermore, the limited open-boat transport to and from the mainland impacted on the availability of large-scale industrial or farming machinery. As the mechanisation of farming was delayed on the islands, some of the traditional skills required to enable self-sufficiency endured. Some older islanders referred to their particular expertise in skills such as making fishing pots or tarring curachs (small boats). The daily challenges of island living were shared by the resident community and contributed to a sense of islander identity. This seemed to form a bond between islanders who had similar experiences:

*"But to be a true islander, I think, now, that's only my opinion, I think you have to be born, reared, brought up on the island. The rough with the smooth, the happy times and the sad times."* (Female, 84)

#### 3.1.2. Mutual co-operation and interdependence
In addition to the islander identity being developed through a sense of shared hardship, most islanders who were born and raised on the islands referred to the intimate community co-operation that was required for survival. This was operationalised through lending or borrowing tools or consumables, and mutual co-operation in fishing or farming. The latter might include a formal fishing co-operative, informal crop rotation (e.g. swapping seed corn with somebody who lived on the other end of the island) or helping a neighbour with a particular task (e.g. rescuing a cow from the bog):

*"Well, you see, one time you see, everything was done with man power. If my cow went bogging, we'll say, and, and, I'd have to call nine or ten…to pull her. Now some fellow goes out with a tractor and put a rope on her and pull her up. You know, you don't need them anymore… There aren't as many cows in it now, like there used to be, but it was a very common thing one time. Cows going into the bog."* (Male, 81)

#### 3.1.3. Out-migration
The harshness of island living (when compared to the mainland) coupled with the lack of employment opportunities contributed to the emigration of many islanders, both individuals and family units. For some, this was in search of work, whilst others left after secondary and higher education had expanded their horizons. This gradually led to the depopulation of the islands:

*"You see, older times, people just…when they grew up, they'd either fish or do things like that, that would keep them going. Most of them anyway. And then, gradually, […] a few people would go to school and then they saw the outside world, they kept going."* (Female, 69)

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[3] Manglewurzels are a cultivated root vegetable.

### 3.1.4. Modernisation

Participants who were born and raised on the islands high-lighted the transformations that were made to daily life after the arrival of a regular and more durable form of ferry transport to the mainland (roll-on roll-off ferries) and utilities (i.e. electricity, water, telephone and alternative forms of fuel). The ferry also made a difference to the availability of secondary education. With the arrival of larger, safer and more frequent ferry boats, the island children no longer had to go to boarding school for the whole term, but were able to return home at weekends. Overall, for most long-term islanders, daily life changed dramatically, becoming less hazardous and more comparable with the living standards of mainland residents. The transformations meant that islanders were able to obtain medicines, a variety of food, cars (and other large commodities), and have more regular access to health care and other services:

> "With that connection, with that good ferry service, our oil lorry can come in and top up your tank. The coal lorry can come in and if anybody wants coal…You have the phone, the phone and the van comes in and tends to your phone, you know. You've all those things you can drive on, drive off, drive to your door." (Female, 84)

Although the lack of household utilities, self-sufficiency and the mutual co-operation of islanders may bear resemblance to life in many remote or rural communities, the transformations and modernisation of the islands happened much later and at a much quicker pace than on the mainland. Thus, an islander identity as culturally traditional, with strong kinship ties and a mutually co-operative and cohesive community representing the bucolic rural idyll (Short, 1991), or moral rectitude (Blaikie, 1997), has endured longer and is more recent than its rural or coastal mainland equivalent. Certainly, some of the statements from participants' narratives indicate that the symbols of the pre-modernised society continue to be part of the common language that is used to construct a long-term islander identity during social interaction with others.

## 3.2. The current imag(in)ery of island identity

Whilst improvements in transport, telecommunications and other utilities have benefited existing islanders, the new facilities have also made the islands more attractive locations for migrants. Subsequently, both islands have experienced a growth in seasonal and permanent migration. Despite the transformations, the islands have retained some of their defining characteristics. Some of these in particular are considered attractive features by islanders and in-migrants, including peace, quiet and seclusion; heritage, culture and tradition; social cohesion and a sense of belonging to a community; and a low crime rate.

### 3.2.1. Isolation: peace, quiet and solitude

The self-sufficient lifestyle that was a necessity before the arrival of the regular ferry service highlights one of the most obvious features of an island, and that is its isolation from the mainland. The sense of remoteness from the mainland, the low population density and the resulting peacefulness were mentioned by those born and raised on the island, return migrants, and incomers on one of the islands as an important quality of the environment. The comparison between island and city living is summed up by a migrant who had lived on the island for over three decades:

> "I would have lived in the area in [a city] where everything was. I had everything apart from cold water and all the amenities that you would want, a colour television in the corner of the room and all that sort of thing. And got married and came over to [the island]

and found uh–uh, they don't have these things in [the island]. But what [the island] did have was the peace and tranquillity, that I couldn't have got elsewhere." (Female, 64)

Despite the peace and quiet being appreciated by some island residents, participants often recognised that these attributes would attract particular types of incomer. Some participants suggested that the peaceful nature of the islands would be ideal for retirees, whilst others noted that it might not be as attractive for young families. Furthermore, some long-term islanders recognised that the relative seclusion of living on an Irish island was changing due to improved access. Mindful that the peace, quiet and solitude attracted visitors, one participant was concerned that too much transformation would impact on the sustainability of the island as a tourist destination:

> "The peace and quiet and the scenery, […] the only worry would be that they would town it and make it too towny. You like to keep it—you like the amenities, but you want to keep it as it is. Because people coming from the mainland, they don't want to come here and see what they left behind. They want to come and see something different. And we like to keep it that way." (Female, 80)

### 3.2.2. Historical and cultural belonging

Perhaps the most frequently mentioned positive attribute of both islands was the socially cohesive nature of their communities, and the sense of belonging that this creates. For some, this was allied to an historical attachment to place, or to the heritage, culture and tradition which was embodied in the islands. Whilst some long-term islanders sought out knowledge about the island's history through reading, or searching out ancient sites, others were embedded in musical culture or sought to trace their lineage on the island (see also historical, traditional and cultural (re)production below). However, this sense of historical or cultural attachment was not confined to those who had been born and raised on the island. One in-migrant from another Celtic region also expressed a special affinity with the island arising from his similar cultural roots:

> "[The island's] got spirit of its own and it's, it's a funny kind of feeling that the island has to accept you, you know. Well the people have to accept you obviously, but the island itself as well. I think because I'm a Celt and I've got all this sort of mythology in me and I'm a great reader of history as well, eh, I think if the island spirit, as I call it, didn't like you, you couldn't live here." (Male, 74)

### 3.2.3. Social cohesion and community connectivity

For islanders born and raised on the island there was continuity in the social cohesion and mutual co-operation from earlier in their life course. However, islanders also recognised that the rapid social and economic transformations had changed the level of social connectivity within the islands' communities. Some older people believed that changes had occurred because of depopulation through emigration, death of peers, and the increase in holiday homes. One older man described how all of his old neighbours had moved away or died, with their homes either empty, occupied by strangers or used as holiday homes. All of these factors meant that there were fewer people with whom to interact socially, especially during the winter months. Some participants suggested that technological advancement had led to a greater degree of individualism. For example, traditionally island entertainment would involve the community congregating for céilí or other social occasions, typically at someone's house or the local hall. These occasions were becoming less frequent as younger (and older) generations used the television to replace this form of community-initiated entertainment. Several participants noted that the social and

economic transformations had decreased community interdependency because there was no longer such a need for mutual co-operation:

> "*Well now, the best thing about it in my way of thinking anyway, the people are neighbourly like and you know, they help each other if there's a thing that they have to. But now, a lot of that is gone too, because they haven't as much want.*" (Male, 81)

Despite the changes in social interaction, participants did refer to community cohesion and some participants pointed out that disputes and arguments had to be dealt with swiftly. One participant noted that if, for example, you were barred from the pub, the landlord may be losing a large proportion of their potential income (given such small population, especially in the winter). Another islander reflected that if someone required help, outstanding grievances were forgotten and the community rallied round. Furthermore, any affront to the islanders from off-islanders would result in solidarity and a united front:

> "*But my view is [...] we may argue and fight among ourselves, but if we get attacked from outside we stand shoulder to shoulder and attack the outsiders back, and that's the way we are [laughs].*" (Male, 80)

The perception of social connectivity and cohesion on the islands was different for in-migrants and return migrants. For migrants, the positive elements of community-belonging on an island were often contrasted with the loose social ties and anonymity associated with city-life:

> "*You've that sense of belonging [on an island]. I like cities, I like cities sometimes [...] 'cause you're anonymous in a city, you can come and go and you can, whatever. You can wear what you like or do what you like, you know, you're anonymous. But on the other hand, it's nice living here because you feel in some ways you do belong. If you're not at something people will sometimes say, 'Oh, where's so-and-so?'*" (Female, 76)

### 3.2.4. Safety and security

It was clear that some older residents were reassured that their absence in the community would be conspicuous. This in turn created a sense of security that in the event of a fall, or other illness, there would be someone calling at the house.[4] The socially cohesive nature of island communities also led participants to believe that the island communities were crime-free. On both islands, participants frequently noted that they were not afraid of burglary or other violent crime. However, the narratives of some participants suggested that this was changing. One participant explained that in the years preceding the roll-on roll-off ferries, the boatmen were aware of who was on the island and, often, what they were leaving with. More recently, the impersonal nature of the ferry journey and the influx of tourists generated a certain wariness of strangers and a heightened awareness that the crime-free nature of island living may be short-lived:

> "*...there was no crime on the island [...]. We were safe enough in that way. But, the way the world is going, it could come here now too [...] There's speedboats now and ferry boats and [...] you could be here now and you could be in [towns on the mainland] in twenty minutes time you know [...]. When a man came here one time, or a woman or you know, they had to be careful because they couldn't*

*leave you know? Like they couldn't do any crime, because, eh... they had no place to go. No place to run. [...] The island was that bit safer anyway in them times.*" (Male, 81)

### 3.2.5. Traditional values

Although for some older people the perception of a strong socially cohesive island community was equated with a crime-free haven, for some in-migrants it was associated with traditional values that had long since vanished from the mainland. The 'moral rectitude' of island life was seen as a positive attribute:

> "*I'd never come across people that are so kind, you know, shop-keepers you know, 'Hi, how are you doing?' you know, 'Where could I get so and so?' 'Oh you'll get it here, hang on I'll phone for you and see if they've got it.' You know, these things are gone on the mainland, [...] but basically eh, it's, it's like how I remember [the mainland] in the 50s, and the 40s.*" (Male, 74)

The current imag(in)ery of island identity shares similarities with the historical imag(in)ery referred to by long-term inhabitants. Certain features of island living are seen as positive attributes by islanders and migrants alike. However, there are some differences between each group. Whereas long-term residents on the islands appreciate the peace, quiet, social cohesion and low crime rates, they are also aware that these characteristics have changed over time. The transformations that have made life easier on the island have also paved the way for in-migration and tourism and both of these phenomena are starting to erode certain aspects of the islanders' identity. The peace and quiet is being jeopardised by more facilities and accompanying increases in visitors; social cohesion is decreasing because there is no longer a need for mutual interdependence, and symbolic markers of communal rituals (e.g. céilí) are increasingly replaced by the individual pursuit of entertainment; and safety and security is seasonally breached by an influx of 'strangers'. On the other hand, migrants still perceive these features to be enduring aspects of the islands' 'rural idyll'. Whereas islanders can see these eroding, a comparison between mainland/city and island values and lifestyles provides the incomers with evidence that island life is peaceful, connected and traditional. Although the present imag(in)ery of island identity is similar regardless of origin (off or on island), the shared symbols of this constructed identity have been arrived at by different means, and therefore, while the 'structure' is the same for native islanders and others, it is likely that the 'meaning' of island identity is not.

### 3.3. Older islanders' contribution to the imag(in)ery of island identity

We have already noted that older islanders born and raised on the island are instrumental in the historical social construction of the island identity. For them the symbols of a more labour-intensive society continue to be part of the common language that is used to construct a 'long-term' islander identity during social interaction with others. In this section, we do not revisit this topic, but discuss other ways in which older islanders contribute to, or detract from the social and symbolic construction of island identity. In particular, we pick up two themes that we identified for the current imag(in)ery of the island identity and examine how older islanders contribute to the production of historical and cultural belonging; and a socially cohesive and connected community.

### 3.3.1. Historical, traditional and cultural (re)production

Many of the island families can trace their lineage back several hundred years. However, in addition to tracing their own histories,

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[4] Despite the perception that there would be someone around to check up on absent members of the community, some participants still had personal emergency alarms.

some older participants use their skills and particular interests to help others find out about their genealogy:

"I do quite a lot of family research, mainly for Americans or Canadians, you know. But there's thousands upon thousands of people living in the United States whose ancestors came from [the] Island. They went there during the period of the famine, they emigrated to there, and you know and they settled mostly in Northern Maine and are […] in every other state in the United States now, you know." (Male, 80)

Other islanders helped to recount the old Irish names for different parts of the islands and different fields across the islands. In this respect, the older islanders appear to relish their familiarity with the island's history and are often at pains to make a distinction between their traditional, local knowledge and the generic knowledge of more recent islanders. In the 'web of significance' – the island community – the islander identity is claimed by those who have access to certain historical symbols, in this case knowledge of lineage. In a similar manner, only those islanders who have been on the island for several years are able to reminisce together. Elsewhere it has been noted that 'knowing the owner of the last registered fishing vessel on the island, or knowing some of the older cottagers were powerful signifiers of belonging' (Gibbons, 2010, p.181).

Undertaking reminiscence in groups amongst people with similar or related experience provides mutual understanding and can help to create a 'community of experience' with others who have made similar life journeys (Schweitzer, 2004). The narratives of older islanders indicate that communal musings over a familiar history have been instrumental in the production of cultural and historical artefacts. Three products were identified in the interviews with older people: two quilts depicting important aspects of the islands (one on each island); and an exhibit for an island museum. Whilst the quilting activities allowed for migrants' contributions (e.g. with depictions of local flora and fauna), the production of the museum exhibits was restricted to input from long-term island residents. As such, being able to produce historical items or reveal important historical detail were perhaps employed as discursive signifiers of authentic belonging.[5] This is illustrated by one participant, who explained the development of the museum piece:

"They're doing what's know as a [reminiscence board] of all that happens from way back eh, 1900s. So I go to the hall every Monday for a couple of hours and I bring old letters and old photographs and old newspaper cuttings. And anything that's missing I can always fill them in on the dates that I remember or what, the dates that was told to me, you know… Yeah, it's going to be on a big board and they're going to have it down properly, down in the museum." (Male, 87)

In addition to being the authentic custodians of the historical imagery of the island identity, several older islanders demonstrated that they were engaged in traditional island activities and thus producing other types of cultural or traditional symbols. These symbols were typically generated through customary gendered roles, whereby women were engaged in time-honoured craft activities whilst men were involved in agriculture, fishing or boat making. Although older women produced local cultural commodities (e.g. knitwear) that were used to market the islands' distinctiveness to off-island consumers (Baldacchino, 1999, 2002, 2006; Butler, 1993; Fairbairn, 1988), men's fishing or farming activities

were mainly for home consumption. However, the visual imagery of an older fisherman or farmer as observed by a seasonal migrant would reinforce the 'notion of coastal communities as Utopian and prelapsarian, an alternative Eden that the modern world was passing by' (Blaikie, 1997, p.632). Furthermore, some participants perpetuated this imagery by passing on the tradition to younger generations (e.g. in yacht-making) or explicitly engaging with tourists. One older man noted how he portrayed the image of altruistic fisherman providing free fish to famous visitors and holiday-makers:

"And then in the summer time you see, […] we go out fishing for mackerel and then I go around and deliver the mackerel […] And there's a lot of tourists that comes along that stay in houses along here […] And you go along and you…you know…and you bring them and say 'Do you want any mackerel?' And they say 'How much are they?' I say, 'Oh nothing at all' I say, 'Just, just, take as many as you want' […] You know, they're amazed." (Female, 76)

In searching for the 'authentic experience' it is likely that the seasonal migrant would relish such encounters with a local older fisherman (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; MacCannell, 1976). This 'ideal-typical experience' (Gibbons, 2010, p.185) would be unusual and not readily available to most visitors. Furthermore, it is likely that the encounter would be the source of post-vacation anecdotes thereby powerfully 'exporting' the imagery of the islander identity by word of mouth.

### 3.3.2. Civic engagement and social cohesion

Many older participants were also actively engaged in civic activities, such as the community development associations on the islands. Other examples were given where older islanders had been actively engaged in supporting others in the community. Informal support included shopping, running errands and taking messages for others; providing a listening ear; and contributing to farming activities on neighbours' smallholdings.

Where older people engaged in traditional activities (e.g. knitting and fishing) and provided support to others, this reinforced the symbolic imag(in)ery of the islander identity identified earlier in this article. Furthermore, by passing on certain traditional skills older people are ensuring an historical continuity of the island imag(in)ery. Collectively and individually, identity is constructed in relation to others (Cohen, 1985). Thus, an island community may construct its identity in contrast to that of the mainland by drawing attention to aspects of island living that are perceived to be in juxtaposition to other cultures. Blaikie (1997) has noted that 'this older way of life, indicated by its ritualised work patterns, dress codes and customs, became scarcer, and so its exemplars became harder to find' (p.632). In this respect, the community characteristics of the island community, and indeed the features of the cultures with which they compare themselves, may be exaggerated. These symbols of distance from other cultures define the community, but also the individual in relation to the community by providing islanders with a reference point for their own behaviour. Conforming to normative and traditional island behaviours thus not only strengthens the identity of the islander, but also serves to influence the construction of the individual's identity in their presentation in everyday life. When outsiders experience this 'authentic' islander identity they are observing the islanders performing islandness, but this performance holds meaning to the actor and is a referent for personal and individual identity (Cohen, 1985).

In the re(production) of the imag(in)ery of the island identity, older people are an important repository of experiences that are expressed and performed during social interaction and discourse. Regardless of origin (on- or off-island), older people have

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[5] 'Authentic' refers to the claims on islander identity negotiated by native islanders (see also Gibbons, 2010; Marshall, 2001).

experienced an earlier period in time when values and behaviours were different. In this respect, this 'mythological' past can be recollected, interpretively reconstructed and contrasted to the present day − a relational contrast between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies, 1957). For some older islanders, the knowledge of local and traditional skills imbues them with the ability to perform island-specific symbolic rituals, whilst others who retain a historical knowledge of the island are able to (re)produce artefacts symbolising lineage, tradition or kinship. Where outsiders (off-islanders) are permitted to contribute to the production of such symbols, for example as observed in the production of quilts, the products themselves may serve the communities' symbolic purposes, but may be infused with different meaning for those who produce them.

### 3.4. Alternative imag(in)eries of island identity for different groups of older people

The narratives of older people demonstrate that they perceived an imag(in)ery of island identity that is contrasted to cultures elsewhere (e.g. on the mainland). However, whilst there is agreement on the symbols that constitute island identity, the meaning of these symbols may differ between subgroups. To date, we have indicated some differences between islanders who were born and raised on the island and those who have migrated (or returned) to the island. In this section, we explore the extent to which the evidence suggests that there are alternative meanings attributed to the symbols of island identity held by different groups of older islanders. In this respect, we move away from the exploration of the symbolically simple public face, the imagery of island identity, to the symbolically complex private face of the imaginary (Cohen, 1985).

#### 3.4.1. Migrants and non-migrants

The communal endurance of hardship amongst older islanders in the past, which was noted earlier, was frequently contrasted with the more recent experience of incomers:

"The way things were. They don't understand really, they're here now with running water, electricity, all modern conveniences, but the original island people, people like myself, we're, we're used, as I would have come as a child as I said with the candle, going to the well for water, you know […]. You see they take all these things for granted." (Female, 87)

This contrast was further differentiated when the concerns of the long-term islanders did not match those of the new residents. Furthermore, migrants' demands were sometimes in excess of the requirements of the islanders who were used to having fewer amenities, and content with the island's level of modernisation:

"It's not that I have any problem with people that have moved in, but it's just that those that have moved in have worked, have bought the house for their retirement, and these are the people that require more than those that are living on the island have been for all their lives. They're looking for more. Demanding more." (Female, 64)

In this respect, the difference in meaning ascribed to symbols of modernisation by in-migrants and long-term islanders provided a source of conflict. Whilst expressions of solidarity support the public imagery of the island, these more complex underlying processes are part of the private imaginary of island identity and the source of tensions between groups. Most subgroups or communities have pejorative names for those who are rejected from certain domains of membership (Fox, 1987; Gibbons, 2010; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). In this respect, in-migrants to the islands were referred to as 'blow-ins' or 'runner-ins'. However,

group identities were not simply delineated by islander (born and raised) versus migrant.

Some older islanders had migrated to the island as young children with parents, whereas others who were raised on the island had moved away for a period, in search of employment, education or other opportunities, and had returned later in life. Both groups of migrants had shared early-life experiences (e.g. education and the difficulties of daily living) with other islanders who were born and raised on the island. In addition, other migrants who had arrived more recently, but still prior to the modernisation of the island, also had a more limited but shared history of experience. With regard to the longer term migrants, several narratives suggested that, rather than the island identity being compromised by incomers' influences, the in-migrants themselves had to conform to community norms:

"It takes a long time for them to blend in with the island. I always say so. But they eventually blend in and that's it, they have no other choice like, and that's it." (Female, 67)

The islands' populations were comprised of islanders (born and raised), return migrants, migrants who were incorporated into the community prior to modernisation, and migrants who settled on the island once transport links and utilities had been improved. With regard to the latter, there were two distinguishing features, that is, permanent and seasonal migrants. However, even within these two groups there was evidence to suggest that there were differences perceived between those who had visited the island for several years as tourists, compared to those who had not. Furthermore, there was a suggestion that some of the more recent migrants chose to keep themselves separate from other islanders, either waiting for the existing inhabitants to make the first move towards social interaction or forming cliques and, thus, retaining a separate identity. The tendency for retirement migrants to group together and not to mix with islanders has also been described elsewhere (Marshall, 1999, p.109).

Studies in other settings have demonstrated a link between the enactment of identities and the acceptance or rejection of an identity by the appropriate community (Gibbons, 2010; Mitchell, 2002; McQueeney, 2009). In this respect, several delineated groups compete for the 'authority' to claim the identity of 'islander'. The narratives in this current study provided evidence as to who could make a genuine claim to the title of older 'islander'. In descending order of 'authenticity', the claims to 'islander' would be ranked as follows:

1. Born and raised on the island (never left).
2. Born on the island, left for education/work/marriage but returned (return migrants).
3. Moved to the island as a young child with parents.
4. Moved to the island as an adult before modernisation and transport links.
5. Moved to the island after modernisation (permanent migrants).[6]
6. Moved to the island after modernisation (seasonal migrants).

However, it is possible to find exceptions to this ranking, suggesting that the classification or claim to 'islander' status is not as simple as proposed above. The complexity of this hierarchy is evident in some of the narratives, and whilst the most recent migrants did not necessarily understand the division between levels 1 and 2 and 3, it was clear that older participants who had lived on

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[6] Given the age of participants in this study, this refers mainly to retirement migrants.

the islands for longer, did so. Furthermore, the position of spouses who have married islanders is not clear cut. Although they may fall under categories 4 or 5, their legitimacy as islanders may also be rooted in their contribution to the future lineage of the islands, as progenitors of the coming island generations. With regard to the differences between islanders and migrants, the first quote is from a migrant who had lived on the island for 25 years (arriving before modernisation). She clearly identifies a difference between islanders who were born and raised on the island, return migrants and others:

"There's a lady who lives up the road […] now she came here as a young girl, […] with her mother […] I mean they've been here now sixty-five years but she still, she says […] 'Well you know in a way we are islanders but in a way we're not, because we weren't born and brought up here.' You see people who were born and brought up here are very proud of that fact you know that they were, they are islanders. Like, like, em, [name] you see, she is an islander like her father you see, she went away to eh, school and then to work […] then she came home but she is coming back to the place […] where they were born and brought up you see." (Female, 76)

In contrast, a migrant who had lived on the island for only eight years did not understand the degree of 'authenticity' in the claims to islander identity. This suggests that the longer someone lived within the community, the greater the depth of understanding with regard to the complex private face of the island imag(in)ery as opposed to the simple public face. As noted elsewhere, the participant had difficult in grasping the 'subterranean level of meaning' that allows them to truly belong (Cohen, 1985, p.11). The recent migrant demonstrated her incredulity at the different levels of legitimacy in the claim to 'islander' identity:

"It is a close-knit community, and you know, I mean as, you could say there's islanders against blow-ins, but they are very acceptable of us […]. And even [name], she calls herself a blow-in which is absolute rubbish. I mean, she came when she was very young and had loads of kids and grandkids. I mean, I said, '[name], that's bit rich', you know, but anyhow she still thinks of herself as a blow-in." (Female, 70)

Although there is a differentiation between migrants and those who were raised on the islands, most islanders recognised that the island required in-migrants in order to survive. The in-migration of marriage partners has been a longstanding characteristic of most Irish islands and has ensured diversification of the gene pool. Others noted that in-migrants were a source of new ideas and broadened the community's outlook. Some participants recognised that in-migration (especially of younger people) helped to ensure that the islands' facilities were maintained. For example, the loss of the primary school could lead to further depopulation and eventually abandonment of the island (Royle, 1999a, 1999b; 2001). Consequently, certain types of migrants were seen as less significant in terms of their potential contribution to the island. While seasonal migrants populated the island in the summer providing an image of a vibrant and robust community, some participants were keen to point out that their economic contribution was negligible. Furthermore, they were conspicuous by their absence during the winter months, when the deserted houses provided visual symbols reinforcing the reality of island depopulation. This phenomenon was more pronounced on one of the islands than the other.

The differentiation between migrants' and native inhabitants' claims to islander identity serves little purpose unless there is some association with status, power and resource allocation. These topics were not specifically addressed in interviews with older islanders

in this study. However, there was some indication that one's 'islander' identity did impact on daily lives, specifically through the shared/different underlying understanding of the imag(in)ery of islander identity.

As noted earlier, in the present day there are fewer occasions on which islanders have to rely on each other. However, for long-term islanders, interdependence is still a symbol of continuity of community norms, when prior to modernisation islanders would make communal use of limited resources. This form of 'primitive communism' has been described on several Irish and Scottish islands (Royle, 2001, p.83). Although the limitation of island resources is nowadays restricted to the infrequent occasions when the weather hampers transport of food and fuel to and from the island, this has an impact on the behaviour of islanders according to their status or group membership. Whereas one participant who had lived on the island all her life explained that it would be perfectly acceptable to borrow items from other islanders, a recent migrant (eight years on the island) was worried about the 'image' she would portray if she ran out of consumables, and was more reluctant to seek help from neighbours:

"Yeah. If you need something, you'll go to that house, you'll get if it was only a bit of timber, bag of coal or something, do you know what I mean? […] Yeah. And you just have to…you have to pull together and share." (Female, 69)

"…I might have thought, 'I should have got more of this', but then you don't like to go and ask the neighbours. Of course they give it to you, but they've, like you know, you can't be a vestal virgin and run out of oil all the time. It's just a bit of a nuisance, you've just got to look after yourself really." (Female, 70)

Cohen (1985) has noted that 'a society masks the differentiation within itself by using or imposing a common set of symbols' (p.73). Whilst community cohesion is understood and perpetuated by in-migrants and long-term islanders as a defining characteristic of the island imag(in)ery, how this is enacted and its meaning is perceived differently by the two groups. While those born and raised on the island interpret islander identity in terms of interdependence ensuring survival during hardship, for some migrants it is expressed through independence that is perceived to demonstrate adaptation to their new environment.

## 4. Conclusions

Underpinned by an approach grounded in critical human ecology and symbolic interactionism, this article has sought to make an original contribution to the fields of gerontology and nissology. With a particular gerontological slant, the article provides a partial picture of the imag(in)ery of islander identity as it does not reflect the social construction of islander for younger generations. As an exploratory article drawing on empirical data collected through in-depth interviews with 19 older residents of two small-island communities located off the island of Ireland, we have addressed the central roles played by older people in creating and sustaining islander identities. Reflecting both public and private representations of islander identity, we contrast an island 'imagery' with an island 'imaginary', resulting in an, at times complex, 'imag(in)ery' of islander identity. Despite the differences in migrant versus native status of participants on each island, both case study sites provide evidence to support our conclusions. In concluding, we return to the three research questions that have guided our analysis.

A first question concerns the degree to which older residents of small-island communities perceive an imag(in)ery of islander identity. Our analysis identified two imag(in)eries of islander

identity. On the one hand, an historical islander identity was structured by the shared hardships and enforced self-sufficiency associated with residence in communities that were relatively remote from the mainland. Relentless out-migration meant that the island's very survival was based on the need for mutual co-operation and interdependence. The historical islander identity only changed partially with modernisation. Interviews indicated a persistence of images and imaginaries linked to pre-modern times, especially amongst long-term island dwellers. On the other hand, contemporary islander identity reflected the increasing diversity of small-island populations. Over time, the relative remoteness of island communities has diminished and new populations have moved in. Alongside historical imag(in)eries, current islander identities are founded on the positively perceived isolation of islands, an historical and cultural sense of belonging, frequent social interaction within cohesive, safe and secure communities, and a persistence of 'traditional' values. The discourse of in-migrants and long-term residents contrasted in terms of their experience of alternative community settings. While the former constructed an islander identity based on previous lives in mainland communities — viewing island living as largely positive — the latter tended to hold more circumspect views of community change, based on their perception of the transformation of their island community in the wake of modernisation.

Our second research question addresses the ways in which older islanders contribute to, substantiate or perpetuate the imag(in)ery of the islander identity. In this respect, the evidence pointed to two key elements of older islanders' roles. First, older people were actively engaged in the (re)production of historical, traditional and cultural representations of island identity. This variously involved helping in-migrants and seasonal visitors to discover their island origins, producing traditional cultural artefacts, passing knowledge of culture down through the generations, and acting to maintain the civic life of the island community. Knowledge of local and traditional skills imbued some older islanders with the ability to perform island-specific symbolic rituals. Other, long-standing, islanders used their historical knowledge of the island to (re)produce artefacts symbolising lineage, tradition or kinship. In-migrants were also able to contribute to the production of some but not all symbols. However, their role in producing symbols of island identity was judged to possess a different meaning to that held by long-term residents.

The third research question set out to investigate alternative imag(in)eries of the islander identity for different groups of older people who live in island communities. In this regard, drawing on Cohen (1985), our analysis sought to extend our gaze from the public face (imagery) of island identity to the private face of the island imaginary. The key distinction, also noted above, was between migrant and non-migrant island dwellers. However, our study revealed often subtle forms of differentiation between overarching categories of island residents. In particular, older people's narratives revealed a hierarchy in relation to claims to islander status. For example, participants who were born and raised on the island could claim the island identity in different ways to those who had been born on the island, but had left for a period for education, work or marriage only to return to the island at a later time. Ranked lowest in the hierarchy were seasonal migrants. Within the hierarchy, though under-explored in our analysis, were gendered dimensions. Women's identities as islanders were not only founded on their length of residence, but also on their role as progenitors of future generations of islanders and, by extension, their role in maintaining the essential role of the community's primary school (regarded as crucial in sustaining an island community).

The exploratory nature of this article means that we are unable to generalise our findings to older residents of other small-island communities, either off the coast of Ireland or elsewhere in the world. For example, we have not been able to consider the role of language in the formation of island identity as both Island A and Island B were English-speaking islands. In other rural areas there are sharp distinctions made between English-speaking and native-speaking inhabitants (e.g. in Wales, Burholt, 2006). The imag(in)ery of islander identity that fosters a sense of local distinctiveness, such as historical and cultural belonging or social cohesion and community connectivity, may be quite different on Gaeltacht islands where language differences between neighbours exist. However, there is clearly scope for further research to explore 'imag(in)eries' of islander identity amongst older people. While our study highlights the contrasting images and imaginaries associated with migrant and non-migrant populations, such broad labels mask more subtle variations in islander identity. In future work, it would be valuable to explore other layers of variation based on older islanders' social locations, based on such categories as gender, age itself, social class, language and health status.

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