

Review:

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Abstract: In "Social Networks and Migration," Louise RYAN reexamines data obtained over 15 years of research to explore how migrants of different ages and backgrounds construct their social networks and how these networks evolve with time as migrants go through different stages in life. RYAN explores the aspirations and needs which migrants aim to address by nurturing existing connections or by creating new ones. With RYAN's approach to qualitative social network analysis (SNA) she emphasizes the specificities—i.e., the content and meaning—of each social connection. RYAN focuses on the individuality of each experience, and intentionally eschews the temptation to generalize to groups or identities of any kind. Her data are based on narratives ("telling network stories"), which yield information on relationships, on their meaning to interviewees, and on their nature and content. The book is particularly insightful in describing the content of relationships as well as their evolution over time. It also inevitably leaves out of its field of investigation more than it covers. It is therefore an invitation to further research into the way migrants shape their networks, how social networks shape their lives, and how they distil this experience in the form of narratives.

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1. Introduction

In "Social Networks and Migration," Louise RYAN tells the stories of migrants from the perspective of their social relationships. She examines who was involved in their decision to migrate, in their choice of destination, and in organizing their migration. She further looks at the social networks involved in finding employment upon arrival, as well as in subsequent stages of their lives. She also describes how migrants developed their friendship networks in their new country of residence and how these networks evolved as they went through different stages in life—such as education, employment, marriage, divorce, children, old age, and sometimes return or onward migration. She examines, finally, how their social networks in their country of origin evolve, and what role they play at different stages of their lives. [1]

Through this detailed examination of the role other people play in the lives of migrants, RYAN paints a rich picture of the way social interactions influence, guide, support or constrain their lives as they embark on that particularly challenging endeavor that is migration and its aftermath. This examination provides unique insights into the many intricacies of the migration process. [2]

In this review I begin by providing a concise overview of the book's structure and contents in section 2. In Section 3, I explain some of the key characteristics of RYAN's approach in "Social Networks and Migration," an approach she claims has advantages which both quantitative SNA and qualitative SNA as it is often practiced do not have. In Section 4, I describe and briefly discuss the author's approach to studying migrants as individuals rather than as categories, her practice of placing migrants' personal stories "in dialogue" with one another, and her interest in exploring the evolution of their networks without assigning them to groups, such as ethnic communities. In Section 5, I go on to discuss the way the author addresses the significance and impact of a person's wider network, beyond direct contacts, on the lives of individuals. In Section 6, finally, I examine the use of narratives as a method to obtain information on people's networks and on the nature of the different relationships which networks embrace. Section 7 concludes the review. [3]

2. Structure of the Book

The book has eight chapters. In the introduction, RYAN explains the concept of the book against the background of her extensive previous work on the subject of social networks and migrations. She dedicates Chapter 2 to examining different approaches to the study of social networks and to situating her own approach in the field, emphasizing, in particular, the shortcomings of some of the existing qualitative and quantitative approaches to the study of social networks. [4]

In Chapter 3, RYAN explores methodological questions. She explains how she conducted her research and provides the background to the data upon which the book is based. It is in this context that she explains and justifies her use of the narrative approach and use of sociograms. [5]

The following chapters are dedicated to the examination of consecutive phases in the lives of migrants: In chapter 4 the author explores stories of arrival; in Chapter 5, the search for employment and the challenges of "deskilling and reskilling;" in Chapter 6, RYAN lays out her findings regarding the evolution of migrants' social networks over the years following migration, and particularly the evolution of friendship networks. In Chapter 7, she turns her attention to the transnational, to examine how migrants' networks in their country of origin evolve over time and how these particular networks contribute to their lives. In this chapter, she also covers cases of temporary and definitive return migration. Having thus covered key phases and dimensions in migrants' social networks, RYAN then finalizes the argument in her conclusion, emphasizing the added value of her narrative approach to social network analysis (SNA) and points to avenues for further research. [6]

3. Social Networks and Rich Narratives

RYAN's approach to the study of social networks is decidedly qualitative. The author centers her research on individuals, to explore their networks as they construct them on their own terms; in this book, she is not concerned with researching any particular group and instead focuses on the meaning which social connections have played in people's lives, and on how these connections have evolved over time. [7]

In Chapter 2, where she introduces her theoretical approach, RYAN distances her work from other qualitative research on social networks which often envisage networks somewhat vaguely as metaphors, and fail to investigate the specifics of social networks. RYAN also cautions against assuming migrants' networks have an "inside" and an "outside," that links with fellow nationals or co-ethnics are necessarily stronger and ethnic networks denser, while connections with others form weak links. Indeed, she has critiqued such assumptions elsewhere as "running the risk of reproducing nation-state and post-colonial hegemonic power structures" (RYAN & DAHINDEN, 2021, p.460). Any tendency to socialize among people of similar origin or ethnicity, therefore, must emerge from research, and should not be assumed a priori. [8]

Just as the author distances her work from those who envisage social networks in excessively vague terms, in the same chapter she also contrasts her work with the quantitative approach to social networks. Quantitative SNA tends to reduce networks to a small number of dimensions. She acknowledges the contribution of quantitative methods, but notes that they fail to capture the evolution of network connections over time as well as the specific content of social connections. In reality, she argues, different links within a network involve very different kinds of relationships. From her point of view, social connections involve the sharing of very different forms of capital—cultural and social capital, in particular. For her, social connections are intersubjectively constructed, a characteristic which quantitative methods are ill-suited to capture. RYAN's ambition is, therefore, to examine the specific content of social connections in their richness and subjectivity. [9]

RYAN not only seeks to explore the content and meaning of social connections; she also examines their evolution over time. In Chapter 3, she explains that the book is entirely based on interview data accumulated by the author between 2004 and 2019 from interviewees living in London. She manages to provide some historical depth in three ways. Ryan has carried out longitudinal studies, interviewing some of her study participants at intervals of several years. This allowed her to compare their social networks at different times. Furthermore, interviewees were themselves at different stages of their lives when she interviewed them: some had migrated to the UK as early as the 1940s and 50s, and had already retired; their social networks could therefore be compared with those of respondents who had recently arrived. Those respondents that had already spent some time in the UK were able to provide their own account of the way their networks evolved over time. The emphasis on the content and meaning of social relationships as well as on their evolution over time stand out throughout this book. [10]

4. Between the Structure and the Individual

All of RYAN's subjects now live in London and the majority are women, but their origins are diverse. They initially came from such different places as the Caribbean, Guyana, Ireland, Poland, France, Africa, and South Asia. The periods of their arrival also differ considerably: some migrated to the UK as early as the 1940's, while others were recent arrivals at the time of the interview. [11]

Though she studies migrants of different backgrounds, RYAN avoids the comparative approach. She chooses not to group her subjects into categories for example, by country or region of origin, by age, or by period of arrival in London (Chapter 3). Throughout the book, she very consistently treats each of her interviewees as an individual and avoids assuming affiliations of any kind unless they emerge from the data. [12]

RYAN also pointedly refuses to envisage migrants from the perspective of identities, whether they be defined as ethnic identities, home country identities, gender, sexual orientation or indeed any other. This is a position she has had opportunity to argue in previous works (e.g., NOWICKA & RYAN, 2015, RYAN, 2015). In doing so, she creates opportunities for comparisons based on other aspects of people's biographies—such as the period or circumstances of their arrival, the stage of life they were at when they arrived, their professional situation, etc. She provides very fruitful insights into the world of migrants that do not emphasize fixed or presumed elements of their identities and do not envisage their social network a priori as a product of these identities. Instead, she explores social networks as the product of each individual's interaction with their environment. [13]

Rather than attempting to compare groups or categories, the author places stories "in conversation with each other." Her comparisons bring to the fore often unexpected parallels and patterns in the evolution of social networks and in their effects. The well-connected uncle in Guyana and the family doctor in Ireland, for

instance, played comparable roles; at different times and in different places, both helped guide young aspiring migrants towards employment in the UK. They are both "weak links" in social network parlance: they are not part of the migrant's close social circle and have little effect on their daily life, but they do provide a valuable and life-changing distant connection where closer relationships such as family and friends could not (Chapter 4). [14]

RYAN also remarks how immigrants, regardless of background, very often turn back to their kinship network in the home country once they have children of their own (Chapter 7). The importance of kinship support networks to help care for young children emerges from many of her accounts, and this seems to be one area of life where the social networks established in the UK by migrants after their arrival usually will not suffice. The family is abroad however, so involving them may require sending the children "back home" over the holidays, a temporary return migration to the family home or even shuttling back and forth between the homeland and London. [15]

RYAN mostly refrains from drawing conclusions, or from generalizing from the network stories she analyses, but the significance of life-stages in shaping social networks emerge strongly from the accounts she provides. Discussions on the matter are indeed particularly insightful and original. For instance, she describes, case after case, how many of her interviewees first connected with people of similar background—such as language or origin (Chapter 5). RYAN shows how migrants often then seek to make contact beyond that group, with varying degrees of success. Often, remote connections with useful knowledge ("weak links") can change their destiny in this new society by helping them find a job, assisting with the paperwork, etc. Making English friends, however, remained a challenge for many of RYAN's interviewees (Chapter 6). Perhaps unsurprisingly, romantic relationships come across as particularly influential drivers of people's social connections, an issue the author discusses for instance in Chapter 6 ("Romance and marriage migration: looking beyond dyads"), but which also recurs throughout the book. Some people came to the UK, or stayed there to be with their boyfriend or girlfriend; one fled her country to escape a spouse. But once children arrive, kinship relations, many of whom are still in the home country, become more important. [16]

5. Networks vs Structure

The effects of networks on people's lives can cut across migrants of different backgrounds. The author views the study of networks as a way of "overcoming 'methodological individualism' while at the same time avoiding social determinism" (Chapter 2, p.20), or as a way of bridging those two approaches. One pioneer of this approach is Elizabeth BOTT (1957), whose work JONES (2018) revisited in this journal. According to this approach, all individuals within a social network steer their own course and manage their social relations. In doing so, they contribute to shaping the network and structure. At the same time, however, the network in turn places constraints on, and shapes the choices of individuals. [17]

The wider network goes beyond the immediate social relations of any single individual. In a 2021 article, RYAN and DAHINDEN underlined the significance of networks beyond a subject's immediate contacts. They wrote of

"the potential of qualitative SNA to analyse supradyadic structures. It is not only the relationship between ego and alters that need to be understood but also the wider relations between alters—supradyads. [...] This approach offers insights into the relationships between supradyads who may indirectly influence why young people decide to move or, indeed, not to move" (p.463). [18]

RYAN thus acknowledges the significance of wider networks and of their transformations on the course of action of individual migrants. But that examination is largely and, perhaps unfortunately, beyond the scope of this particular book. [19]

RYAN argues quite persuasively that working with qualitative SNA helps reconcile methodological individualism and structural determinism. She underlined in an earlier article that the social network approach can in theory be used to highlight the relevance or otherwise of social groups, including for instance neighborhood, class, gender, ethnicity etc., as they emerge in the formation of denser networks, or in the narration of interviewees (Chapter 2; see also RYAN & DAHINDEN, 2021). However, the author does not put her study to that sort of purpose in this book. [20]

When she does specify the role of "structure," as opposed to personal networks, it is generally in reference to wider political and social circumstances such as post-colonial relations and EU membership: In the 50's, Guyanese people mostly migrated to Britain rather than to other industrialized countries because of Britain's colonial ties with Guyana (Chapter 4). Likewise, in the 2000's, Polish people migrated to the UK after the EU established the free movement of people between member states and the UK was one of the first countries to give labor market access to migrants from Poland (Chapter 3). This aspect of the structure is far removed from the participants in the study, however, and therefore does not come across as emerging from particular social networks. As a result of the removal of the wider structure from the object of the research and of its focus on

the networks of individuals, structure usually appears detached from, and dominating over individual migrants and their networks of social relations. [21]

Having acknowledged the structure, the author thus moves it to the background of her discussion, to highlight the agency of individuals within the conditions and constraints of their immediate social environments. In doing so, RYAN helps us discover the life of migrants as a process, a social transformation that people undergo. [22]

6. Telling Network Stories

The author makes a point of using narratives to study networks, a point she introduces in Chapter 2, in which she focuses on her theoretical approach. Biographical interviews focused on social networks, combined with sociograms, help induce people to share information about their social networks, to contextualize them and to provide information about the roles which social relations play in their lives. [23]

Narratives, she underlines in that chapter, are used to justify actions. It is reasonable to believe, therefore, that the connections emphasized in narratives as well as the meaning they are given are shared selectively with an interviewer. They may therefore differ from the accounts which other people would have given of the same set of events. In her research, RYAN seeks to partly compensate for this through the use of sociograms—a graphic representation introduced in Chapter 3 that indicates current key connections according to their degree of proximity and to the social sphere they belong to—family, work, neighbors/hobbies, and friends. Among other advantages, sociograms help interviewees exercise reflexivity. The author tells of at least one interviewee who realized that their sociogram seemed inconsistent with their narrative and subsequently modified it. [24]

Narratives are not only constructed to justify the past; they also reflect a worldview, and they embody and reveal a particular perspective and even inspire action. Jerome BRUNER (2004, p.708) claimed that "the ways of telling [...] become so habitual that [stories] finally become recipes for [...] not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but for directing it into the future." Narratives are intimately connected to the way people plan their lives as well as to the lessons they draw from their experience. Migrants' lives might be particularly well suited to story-telling. They are marked by a before and an after and involve at least one life-changing event (the migration journey), followed by uncertainty, opportunities, and dangers. [25]

It would have been interesting to learn more about the different kinds of narratives that RYAN's respondents shared with her over two decades and about the insights they provided into the meaning people give their experience of migration and of the various contacts they made along the way. In retrospect, it would be engaging to find out the different ways in which different people characterized the countless encounters which helped them chart their course

through life. Can parallels be drawn between migrants, based on the way they tell their stories? Are there recognizable storylines common to different migrants? An exploration of the way in which people tell their story of network-building in migration is bound to provide further valuable insights, too, and add a further dimension to this rich investigation. [26]

However, RYAN appears to have constructed her book around a particular narrative of migration, which she does not spell out however: that of migrants edging their way into society and up a pre-existing social ladder. According to this narrative, they create and mobilize their social networks to try to overcome the barriers of language, prejudice, qualifications, etc. For this, they want to befriend people higher up the social ladder or people endowed with greater valuable social and cultural capital. But life often pulls them back—to their family, to their original social position, to their co-ethnics or to their country of origin. [27]

It is true that the author does not explicitly formulate this narrative, but it can arguably be inferred, *inter alia* from the five questions that structure the book—questions spelled out at the end of her theoretical chapter (Chapter 2), centered on moving to the UK (Chapter 4), settling in, finding a job (Chapter 5), making friends (Chapter 6) and keeping up with family and friends back home (Chapter 7). These five questions formulate challenges associated with successive phases in the lives of migrants, and thus themselves define a narrative structure. [28]

Other elements also suggest an implicit framing of migrants' narratives. In her theoretical discussion on social networks, RYAN emphasizes that the "social capital inherent in [social] ties cannot be taken for granted" (p.81): The content and meaning of ties must be examined and should not be assumed. She makes regular use of the terminology of social and cultural capital in describing those ties. At the same time, she also refers to individuals in "higher social positions" who often play key roles in the lives of migrants. This qualification makes intuitive sense when talking of a supervisor at work or of an established resident assisting a newcomer. However, it does suggest a hierarchical representation of society which is at odds with the network approach. RYAN argues that the value of the capital that is exchanged is determined by the context of the relationship, not by a predetermined social hierarchy. Writing of "higher social position" therefore assumes a particular position in a network which the book does not actually explore. [29]

To be sure, this narrative of integration and social hierarchy is a perfectly legitimate way to tell a story. It also makes for good storytelling. However, it would have been beneficial to read whether that is also how the migrants who were interviewed envisage their own stories. Are those the questions they asked themselves at different stages in their lives? We know that some migrants, for instance, first came temporarily, intending to return home after a few months or years. Others merely followed a lover or a relative, or fled a toxic relationship or a hostile environment, and then took it from there. Others still, some interviews suggest, were apparently in it for the adventure. How did these different starting points affect their stories? Did British society somehow draw them into a common

structure and narrative, one of integration and social hierarchy? Or did their different starting points lead them to construct entirely different stories? [30]

Because RYAN's methodology focuses on narratives, it would be interesting to find out whether any other narrative structure emerges from the interviews she conducted. Researching social networks through narratives could, therefore not only help answer RYAN's five questions listed above, but indeed formulate the questions which migrants themselves have formulated and which might have guided their lives and influenced the way their social networks evolved. [31]

7. Conclusion

In this book, RYAN offers a thorough exploration into the evolving networks of migrants, an original approach to the study of migration. Seen through the double lens of narratives and networks, migration is not a phenomenon, and migrants are not a category. In RYAN's book, migrants are the principal characters of their own stories: Stories that hinge on how they made the momentous step that is migrating, how they built their (social) lives in the UK and how those lives then evolved through work, home-making, friendship networks and links with the family and friends back home. [32]

Discovering these stories is in itself valuable. It provides the reader with a wide-ranging spectrum of personal experiences, limited only by the common location of all interviewees—London. These stories provide vivid insights into the diversity of the experience of migrants, but also into their hopes, concerns, and eventual destiny. [33]

The lives of migrants make for compelling story-telling, but they are also ideally suited to SNA. For RYAN, "migration stories are, at heart, relational stories" (p.153). As migrants move between places and social groups, their place in society cannot be adequately described through their belonging to any particular group, location, or institution. Evolving social networks seem to provide a richer reflection of their experience. The book is thus an important contribution to the study of migration and of social networks. By focusing not only on individual lives, but on the relationships which have shaped those lives, RYAN provides a very human and promising angle on the study of migrations. [34]

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