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From the Rainbow Nation
to the
Land of the Long White Cloud:
Migration, Gender and Biography

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

Massey University, Albany,
New Zealand.

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to and extends two well-established traditions in sociology: firstly, it uses a biographical approach to study the experience of international migration; and secondly, it generates theory from the lived texture of individual lives. Specifically, the research uses the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) to describe, analyse and theorise the gendered experience of migration from ‘the rainbow nation’ of South Africa, to New Zealand, ‘the land of the long white cloud’. The thesis follows and further develops BNIM’s sociobiographic approach, integrating a stronger sociological focus, and emphasising the feminist values of transparency, reflexivity and an attention to power differences between the researcher and her interviewees. In-depth interviews based on a single narrative-seeking question are conducted with South African migrants from several divergent groups, and are then used as the foundation for a process of intensive researcher-led group analysis. From this meticulous analytical process the researcher produces three detailed individual case studies. It is argued that in order to comprehend the significance of broad social phenomena such as migration and gender, it is imperative to have an appreciation of their meaning in the context of individual lives.

Noting the occurrence of migration-related disruption across each of the case studies, the thesis uses the concept of biographical disruption to generate an innovative analytic vocabulary and a model that together describe and represent the gendered biographical experience of international migration. The research also uses the analytic language and the model to illustrate the impact of migration on the gender dynamics of migrants’ intimate relationships. It does this by considering one of the pivotal tensions through which gender dynamics are reconstructed in the context of migration, the tension between migrants’ productive and reproductive responsibilities. The language and the model theorise the resolution of this tension in a number of ways, thus extending the terms of the debate about the impact of migration on gender dynamics beyond the current binary conceptualisation of emancipation or subjugation. The utility of the language and the model in their depiction of the overall biographical experience of migration, and the illustration of the effect of migration on gender dynamics is demonstrated in the thesis through their application to each of the individual case studies.
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