

A COUNTRY CHILDHOOD IDYLL

Return migration to rural Denmark

Objective

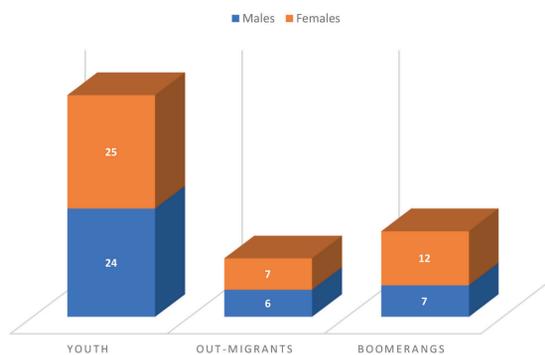
In contemporary society with rapid social changes and a constant pressure to meet the demands of competences of the knowledge economy, there is an expectation of the need for Western youth to pursue higher education, which often involves geographic mobility, resulting in significant rural-to-urban migration. The purpose of this research is to study migration dynamics in relationships between resourceful young people and rural places, in order to get to grips with what makes places (un)attractive, when and for whom. With point of departure in two Danish rural settings with few flagship attractions and cultural assets, the study contributes with analyses of the migration motivations, experiences and trajectories of rural, resourceful young people who belong to or in future potentially will belong to the professional category of knowledge workers. Further, the research sheds light on how particular geographical settings and local particularities affect upon out- and return migration, identity construction and act as contexts for young adults' lived lives and everyday interactions. This will add to our understanding of the underlying factors associated with the movements of young people to and from Danish rural areas.



Run-down dilapidated homes are common in the rural landscape in Denmark.

Method

The study builds on 47 qualitative interviews with 82 young adults, living or having lived in a Danish rural region that suffers from youth out-migration. The sample consists of 45 females and 37 males, age range 18-40. The selection of participants were based on getting resourceful young people, who represent three different life stages: 1) Rural youth who, due to increased educational demands, are in a situation where they have to navigate between the present in their local area and a future life situation in a potentially different context. 2) Young people who have migrated from a rural region to the city to attend higher education. 3) Highly educated individuals who have returned to the rural setting of their childhood after years of living in the city.



The study focuses on two rural settings located around four hours' drive from the Danish capital of Copenhagen and situated half way between two regional centres. The local economies rely primarily on transport and trade, but both settings have also seen growth in knowledge-intensive industries resulting in changes in local labour market demands.

Findings

Migration into rural areas is often explained in terms of the rural idyll, and the attraction of the countryside with its less hurried way of life. This migration phenomenon has mostly been researched in either high-amenity, popular rural areas, traditional rural regions with local economies dependent on farming, fishing or mining, or regions that cover vast geographical areas with great distances to larger regional centres. This study, focusing on less remote places that are not dependent upon traditional rural economies, reveals that classic quality of life motivations play a role in decisions to move to less-popular rural areas. However, while the pull of the rural idyll and the importance of career prospects and cultural factors (manifestations as well as mentality) should not be neglected in forming part of the complexity that makes places attractive, the findings demonstrate that the conscious (and often subconscious) role played by nostalgic remembrances of own childhoods, notions of safety, social capital and belonging act as primary drivers for moving to a specific rural area. Due to the egalitarian ideologies, norms and behaviors of the rural place of origin, often articulated as The Jante Law mentality, along with overly critical representations of rural places in the media and in narratives in general, actual and imagined return migration is, however, interwoven with ambivalent feelings of stigmatization, doubt and shame, as staying behind or returning is perceived as a step back; a downward social mobility.



The young people experience a necessity 'to get out to get on'.



Memories of safe childhoods are highlighted among the interviewees.



Beautiful nature and a less hurried way of life are classic draws of the countryside.



School and business closures symbolize the lack of development in the countryside.

THE JANTE LAW
DON'T THINK YOU'RE ANYTHING SPECIAL

Denmark

- Denmark is traditionally perceived as a relatively affluent and politically stable country with high levels of social and gender equality.
- Denmark has a population of 5,714,799 and covers 43,094 sq. km of land. While 63% of the total population lives in the most urbanized parts of the country today, Denmark is among the European countries with the most rapid urban population growth.
- 9th grade marks the end of compulsory schooling, but Denmark has set a national objective that at least 90 per cent of all youth should complete a youth education before the age of 25, and that 60 per cent should complete a higher education.

Conclusions

Life phase and place belonging are determining factors for place attractiveness, just as social networks play a central role when addressing motives for migration among resourceful young adults. Social affiliations in terms of family and friends not only anchor their attachment to their childhood places, but also shape their thinking about present and future migration intentions. Young people's feelings of attachment hereby center on the social relationships in their lives, and the research draws attention to the complexities, negotiations and contestations in these relationships, as the young adults carve out a place in which they belong.