SUBJECTIVITIES OF SURVIVAL: CONCEPTUALISING *JUST* RESPONSES TO DISPLACEMENT, CROSS-BORDER MIGRATION AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Dorothee Hölscher

This article considers the implications for social work of displacement, migration and structural violence in urban South Africa. To this end, I explore the life stories of five cross-border migrants. I find that all five form part of South Africa's larger pool of surplus populations but face additional, citizenship-based forms of exclusion. Even though generally self-reliant, all of them experienced cumulative agency constraints and felt vulnerable. Against this background, I propose that current, refugee-centred services should be expanded and that interventions should be carefully balanced to attend to structural issues, inter-group conflict and the range of vulnerabilities articulated by cross-border migrants.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of justice is so complex that, according to Sen (2009), we are required to deduce many of its qualities and requirements from our awareness of what transpires in its absence: we know justice when it is lacking. Sen (1999, 2009) maintains that for justice to prevail, certain conditions need to be present. For example, people require the "freedom to choose" (Sen, 2009:19) between different kinds of valuable beings and doings; they "have to be seen… as actively involved – given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny" (Sen, 1999:53). In other words, *agency* is a constitutive component of justice. Yet while justice remains a generally accepted reference point in social work discourses and debates (Hölscher, 2012), questions of agency are considered less often. The purpose of this article is to apply the concept of agency in the analysis of cross-border migration to South Africa and to explore its implications for social work interventions and services in this field of practice.

Since the end of apartheid South Africa has attracted cross-border migration at an unprecedented scale (Crush, 2011). For example, from 2006 to 2011 the country received the world's highest annual number of individual asylum applications (UNHCR, 2013).While it has been difficult to establish the total number of cross-border migrants living in South Africa (Crush, 2011), the number of registered asylum seekers and recognised refugees is currently in excess of 300 000 persons (UNHCR, 2015). The majority of migrants settle in South Africa's fast-growing urban centres (Landau, Segatti & Misago, 2011; UNHCR, 2015). These are dynamic environments characterised by *inter alia* escalating levels of poverty and degradation, and local authorities trying to meet their governance mandates within considerable budgetary constraints (Hart, 2013; Landau *et al.*, 2011; Simone, 2004). A growing body of literature attends to issues of poverty and survival among South Africa's urban poor at large (see, for example, Simone 2004, 2010, 2011). Yet much is still to be understood about the specific challenges and survival strategies among cross-border migrants and how these might intersect with the conditions imposed on them by South Africa's social, political, economic and legal environment (Amisi & Ballard, 2006; Black *et al.*, 2006). The implications of this for social work will need to be explored accordingly.

Some generic and a few specialised social services are provided for South Africa's urban residents by provincial administrations and a small number of NGOs; however, these have been found to be far from adequate (Lombard, Kemp, Viljoen-Toet & Booyzen, 2013; Patel, 2015; Raniga & Kasiram, 2010). There are dedicated, largely UNHCR-funded, services for recognised refugees and certified asylum seekers, yet they reach but a small fraction of the eligible population (Hölscher, Bozalek & Zembylas, 2014). In addition, questions have been raised concerning their outlook and effectiveness (Hölscher *et al.*, 2014; Landau & Duponchel, 2011). South Africa does have a system of

social grants, and the state has been successfully challenged to extend its provisions to permanent residents and recognised refugees (Lawyers for Human Rights, 2012). However, the grants are remedial in nature and therefore cannot address South Africa's chronically high levels of unemployment, underemployment and poverty (Ballard, 2013). Much like their South African contemporaries therefore, cross-border migrants have been found to rely on their own initiative and networks to survive (Amisi & Ballard, 2006; Crush, 2011; Hölscher, Sathiparsad & Mujawamariya, 2012; Landau, 2006, 2007).

A recent survey of refugees and other migrants in four southern African cities, Landau and Duponchel (2011) found, following an analysis of the data for aggregate vulnerabilities and sources of resilience, that refugees, other migrants and indigenous residents in southern Africa's urban centres were all surviving self-reliantly, without "welfarist intervention" (Landau & Duponchel, 2011:13). The authors conclude that, "receiving refugee status is not a good indicator of someone's substantive experience, nor does it have a strong effect on welfare [needs]" (2011:2). They recommend therefore that refugee-centred social services as currently provided in South Africa should be reduced to "a series of initial interventions based on what are … likely … obstacles towards self-reliance and social integration" of "newcomers" (2011:15-16) and the provision of a temporary "emergency safety net" for those who are vulnerable, that is, unable to "capitalise on cities' opportunities", namely "unaccompanied minors, single parents, the elderly and infirm, and people of rural origin" (2011:16-17). A focus on "refugee-centric programming" (2011:2) beyond these limited interventions may "foster political resentments that will ultimately undermine [their] sustainability" (2011:14). Instead, Landau and Duponchel (2011) propose that xenophobic and exclusionary discourses and practices, and the apparent need for greater inclusion, be addressed at the political and policy levels. This, they suggest, will help to create enabling conditions for people's exercise of *effective choices* (2011:14) and *agency expansion* (2011:15). Against the background of South Africa's already limited welfare provision, however, their call for a reduction of direct services requires careful scrutiny.

In this article I draw on a qualitative analysis of five cross-border migrants' life stories. I explore the implications for social work of their experiences around displacement, migration and structural violence in South Africa and the provision of social services. I begin with an outline of the study's methodology, followed by a presentation of findings. These are organised to trace the development of each research participant's experience of agency. Moving from a reflection on that phase in their lives when migration or flight seemed inevitable (uprooting) to a discussion of their choice of destination, arrival and initial efforts of re-routing (taking action to survive), I interrogate some of the obstacles experienced in this regard (facing obstacles). Lastly, I present the participants' reflections on their lives' accomplishments, as well as their affective and strategic responses to life's challenges (losing hope, losing dignity, claiming agency). I conclude that the concept of agency can be helpful in the critique and development of social work services and interventions, but that it should be de-linked from the notion of self-reliance. Likewise, vulnerability and self-reliance should be seen as separate concepts. I suggest that to respond

justly to the challenges experienced by cross-border migrants, social services should not be curtailed but improved: Interventions should be carefully balanced to attend to structural issues, inter-group conflicts and the range of vulnerabilities articulated by cross-border migrants themselves. In this way, social work may be able contribute to the deepening and expansion of agency among cross-border migrants in South Africa.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A qualitative, dialogical conceptualisation of social policy and services requires a methodology that is able to capture at once the separateness of human experience, the idiosyncrasies of human agency and the relationality of human existence – without losing sight of the ways in which broader societal constellations pre-structure and condition human lives differently for different people. A growing body of methodological arguments in the field of refugee studies provides guidance in this regard (e.g., Ghorashi, 2007; Limbu, 2009). More generally, Miller (2000) contends that when the aim is to explore the intersection of personal trajectories with broader historical patterns and social structures, life story research is particularly well suited. I collected the life stories considered in this article from a group of cross-border migrants as part of a multisite ethnographic study designed to explore the implications of cross-border migration for conceptualisations of justice. I identified potential participants through purposive sampling from a variety of relationships and research sites. The eight adults who agreed to be interviewed were of a similar age, but otherwise roughly representative of the diverse population concerned in the study. I excluded two life stories because the data had been processed elsewhere already (Hölscher *et al.*, 2012) and a third life story because the material it contained was covered sufficiently by the interviews already selected. Table 1 provides an overview of the five research participants included in this article and the sampling criteria used.

Between May 2008 and June 2009 I conducted twelve interviews with the five participants concerned. In all instances the first interview was unstructured. In the one to two interviews that followed, semi-structured guides were used to explore topics that had emerged during the first meeting. Three of the interviews were held in English and two required the presence of an interpreter. One participant (Sébastien) preferred to be interviewed in French and brought a friend who translated both questions and responses. I checked the accuracy of his interpretations during my transcription of the interview. Another participant (Léocadie) brought her husband (François) along. During her interviews she switched between English, Swahili and French, with her husband translating French and Swahili into English; he did not translate my questions. I could only verify the accuracy of his interpretations from Swahili against Léocadie's non-verbal expressions during the interview, but was able to check his translations from French during transcription. Intermittently, he added his own views and experiences to the interview. To acknowledge this role, I retained his voice whenever he did.

I analysed the data using Charmaz's (2003) model of constructivist grounded theory and Fairclough's (2001) method of critical discourse analysis. The initial results guided a comprehensive literature review, followed by contextual analysis, delineation of this

article's topic and theoretical approach, reduction of themes, development of sub-themes and core categories, and selective coding. The process ended with the integration of participants' stories with empirical and theoretical literature into the narrative presented here. The names of people and places in this article have been either withheld or changed. All participants had access to their interview transcripts, and two provided feedback on the first draft of this article. I kept a detailed audit trail, and selected data were analysed by an independent researcher. The study's limitations are those common to ethnographic research, including the impact of the researcher herself on the type and quality of data generated (see Gobo, 2008). Because of the small sample size, I lay no claim to the generalisability of the findings. Instead, the article's value lies in its substantive contribution to the study of cross-border migration and its implications for social work.

TABLE 1
OVERVIEW OF SAMPLING CRITERIA AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AT THE TIME OF THE STUDY

Code name	Gender	Age	Family Status	Country of Origin	Living in South Africa since…	Residence Status	Highest Qualification	Work	Relationship with Researcher
Bola (B)	F	41	Married; two children	Nigeria	2004	Work permit holder	PhD in Human Sciences	Tutor	Colleague
Émile (E)	M	32	Unmarried; living with girlfriend and their child.	Burundi	1999	Refugee	Bachelor Degree in Agricultural Studies	Unemployed security guard	Living at local church after May 2008 xenophobic violence
Lance (LZ)	M	39	Single; no children	Zimbabwe	2008	Asylum seeker	Artisan (technikon level)	Casually employed construction worker	Service user at refugee services organisation
Léoca-die (LC)	F	40	Married; seven chil-dren (three in DRC / missing)	DRC (East)	2005	Refugee	Bachelor Degree in Sociology	Vendor	Living at lo-cal church after May 2008 xenophobic violence
Séba-stien (S)	M	42	Married; three children (Wife and children in DRC)	DRC (Kinshasa)	2006	Refugee	Artisan (secondary school level)	Car guard	Service provider at shopping centre

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section contains my interpretation of the stories narrated by the study's participants: Bola, Émile, Lance, Léocadie and Sébastien. Between them, they held three different residence permits in South Africa (see Table 1) – along with three concomitant sets of obligations and entitlements. They felt in common that none of them could, or would, live in their respective countries of origin. Hence all were committed to establishing sustainable livelihoods and acquiring what they considered appropriate social positions. My objective for this section is to render visible the weave of emotions, thoughts and actions in each life, and how this relates to the particular contextual conditions within which the protagonists found themselves over time. This allows me to develop a genealogy of the different forms of agency the participants had experienced by the time we met.

UPROOTING

Many analysts agree that since the early 1970s structural changes in global economic and political constellations have undermined and unsettled emerging social and political economies in post-colonial Africa, setting in motion large, complex population movements. The variety of precipitating events in particular instances notwithstanding, migration remains one of a shrinking number of viable survival strategies for individuals and house-holds alike (Black *et al.*, 2006; Collyer, 2010; Findley, 2001; Kihato, 2004). While some of the people thus displaced remain within the boundaries of their country, others cross national borders. It is in relation to this context that I would like to introduce the concept of agency into the argument. Crocker and Robeyns (2009:75) define agency as follows:

> "A person … is an agent with respect to [a particular] action … to the extent that … [she] *decides for herself* rather than someone or something else making the decision…; [she] *bases her decision on reasons* …; [she] performs or *has a role in performing* [*the action*]; and … thereby brings about, or contributes to *bringing about*, *change in the world*". (emphasis added)

The common distinction between "labour" or "voluntary" and "forced" migration is based upon presumed levels of agency exercised at the point of uprooting: "refugees *are forced* to flee" while "migrants … *choose* to move" (UNHCR, *n.d.*, emphasis added). As noted above, in South Africa this division gives rise to differential access to social grants and welfare services, amongst other things. The extent therefore to which the differentiation reflects the lived realities of the people concerned merits exploration. To this end, I draw on the stories narrated by Bola, the "labour migrant", and Émile, one of the refugees, noting, however, that similar points were made by all five participants. Before coming to South Africa Bola was an academic at a Nigerian university, an environment which she characterises as endemically corrupt. She describes how she tried to take a stance against corruption in her workplace and suffered prolonged victimisation as a result. Interpreting her experience in relation to Nigeria's history of successive military regimes, Bola suggests that under military rule,

> "*Corruption … became the culture, a way of life. If you were not doing it, you became the odd one out. It is actually normal now to bribe … [But] if you come to Nigeria, you find that people pray a lot … And people with that kind of*

background try to separate themselves [from these practices] *… and they persecute them …* [After challenging the corruption surrounding student admission into my programme,] *I was persecuted… My colleagues … sabotaged my training … My life was made miserable … If you really want to be academic, there is no way that you can stay.*" (12.06.09)

In this statement Bola positions herself in terms of particular principles that defined what being an academic meant to her, as well as placing her outside of what she considered to be dominant norms and practices. The changing subjects in her narration, together with her shifting uses of active and passive voice, frame the key events leading to her departure as a loss of control in the wake of the principled position she had adopted. Thus Bola articulates a sense of growing powerlessness in relation to broader constellations and processes that in the end rendered departure as seemingly the only reasonable choice. Also intertwined with the historical processes that shaped the fortunes of his country was Émile's refusal to become embroiled in Burundi's decades-long conflict over economic stakes and political dominance. He explains:

"*If you are Hutu, they are breaking everything. If you are Tutsi, they do the same thing. Then you must be in the political, and I refused… I refused myself to cut the blood for someone… I told* [my parents]: *If this war is carry on like this, it is better I must go.*" (26.11.08)

In this account the socio-political dynamics at work in Burundi are shown to have limited – but not completely thwarted – Émile's range of options. Similar to the effects of Bola's narrative, his use of the imperative "must" alongside the indicative "refuse" frame his decision not to participate in the civil war as an expression of his moral core. And like Bola, Émile describes this stance as having given rise to a course of events which pushed him to leave.

In Crocker and Robeyns's (2009) terms, the choice to engage in a particular survival strategy would constitute an exercise of agency only to the extent that the person would not have chosen otherwise had circumstances allowed. While one cannot claim an absence of choice for either Bola (the "voluntary" migrant) or Émile (the refugee), the above quotes suggest that neither would have elected to leave had they felt that circumstances provided them with a reasonable alternative. Instead, both imply that it was their initial decisions to make positive changes in their respective life worlds that set in motion courses of events, the main feature of which became the diminishing of alternative options. In both cases, therefore, the dividing line between "choosing" and "being forced" to migrate operated independently of the dividing lines created by the "refugee-versus-migrant" discourse. This binary is therefore unlikely to do justice to the complex ways in which many migrants may have experienced a loss of agency within their countries of origin – experiences that sometimes culminate in a decision to leave.

TAKING ACTION TO SURVIVE

Kihato (2004:6) is one of several observers who note that since the end of apartheid South Africa has come to be "perceived as relatively peaceful" and "one of the wealthiest [countries] on the continent", contributing to its position as a key destination

and transit point for cross-border migrants, including refugees (Black *et al.*, 2006; Crush, 2011; UNHCR, 2013). Apart from Léocadie, who – traumatised by protracted civil wars in the Eastern DRC – says that, "*We didn't plan to come here; we were lucky to ... go very far*" (29.11.08), all participants confirm this observation. Sébastien, also a refugee, explains:

> "*I loved South Africa ... A friend ... told me that there is no difference from ... European countries ... He* [told me about] *the ATM system ... the transport ... [and] the credit... The country is advanced in development.*" (09.08.08)

How such perceptions can inform individual life choices is well expressed by Émile:

> "*When you are watching a TV, you [think that South Africa]... is a nice country in Africa, you can work and studying and can do our life*" (26.11.08)

Replicating general trends (Landau *et al.*, 2011; UNHR, 2015), all five research participants settled in one of South Africa's main urban centres. These rapidly growing metropolises have been described as places where "ethnic heterogeneity, economic marginalisation and pastiche are the empirical norm, not the exception" (Landau, 2007:5), and where the "pursuit of individual aspirations largely depends on what kinds of connections residents can put together between the diverse infrastructures, spaces, populations, institutions and economic activities of the city" (Simone, 2004:3-4). Taking root in such a context can be difficult. The following quotes illustrate the two survival challenges narrated by all five participants: hunger and homelessness.

> "*I got to a point where I was penniless ... I started sleeping ... in the harbour ... I will sleep in the guard house without a blanket, without nothing, just sleep.*" (Lance, 02.06.09)

> "*Things were really very difficult because we could hardly eat ... There was a day that the [children] would eat just dry bread ... We just drank water.*" (Bola, 27.11.08).

Denning (2010:80) reminds us that "capitalism begins not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living". It is at precisely this point that the participants' hopes and aspirations gave way to necessity as choice was replaced by the need to offer labour on whichever market was accessible. Bola targeted the knowledge industry. However, she competed unsuccessfully for positions she thought herself well qualified for and felt that at times that she was side-lined deliberately. Adjusting her expectations accordingly, Bola decided to settle for less than her qualification and previous work experience had prepared her for:

> "*I wasn't going to get the ... position I had assumed I would... The 'post doc' became a thing for survival: just to earn the money rather than doing the research itself ... [But] even a 'post doc' was a mission to get.*" (10.12.08)

Meanwhile, Lance's attempts to access the construction industry yielded only temporary success:

> *"I went to [a recruitment agency] ... I just signed ... I was standing for somebody ... so it just lasted two weeks ... And then the job market just dried up."* (02.06.09)

In spite of possessing scarce skills, Sébastien's options were constrained by the boundaries of the Congolese niche market (compare Amisi & Ballard, 2006):

> *"I did not have a choice on what I am going to do as a work ... When ... you are a newcomer ... those who welcome you are maybe car guards ... they will be obliged to put you ... on the track where also they are working. Though it's difficult ... you will find yourself in that obligation to work, to get a way of surviving; because if you reject, they will also reject you."* (28.06.08)

Car guarding, however, is an as yet unregulated economic sector – with tangible consequences in the lives of the people it employs. Sébastien narrates:

> *"We ... have a manager ... This lady goes in a [shopping] centre, she said "I as a company, I will put my car guard in your centre to protect cars ..." And if the owner of the centre accepts ... you will be called ... For that reason ... we pay her ... And the uniform that we are wearing ... we pay for that ... We don't have a month end, nothing ... Every day, standing from [8 am] to [7 pm] ... we are under rain, we are under heat ... We are just living by donations ... You are not sure of what you will get at the end of the day, but you must pay first before you start."* (28.06.08)

Léocadie, finally, had hoped that her strategy of vending and selling home-made products would enable her husband's return to his former occupation in the aviation industry, but found that the financial odds were stacked too highly against her:

> LC   *"I was making bead work, selling shoes ... I was trying ... to put the money to the bank because papa was supposed to go to learn ... the training for pilot."*
>
> A   *"That never happened?"*
>
> LC   *"The money ..."*
>
> F   *"It was too much."* (29.11.08)

In short, in pursuit of livelihoods, this study's participants engaged those openings that were available – and survived. At the same time their testimonies suggest that circumstances in South Africa profoundly limited their respective abilities to "effectively shape their own destiny" (Sen, 1999:11). What was the nature of the blockages? Scholars trying to come to terms with the changing living conditions in cities of the Global South have re-developed an interest in the Marxist conceptualisation of *relative surplus populations* (Bernstein, 2010; Denning, 2010). Whereas previously, both welfare and developmental ideologies framed such populations as temporarily redundant, it seems increasingly that they are considered as permanently superfluous and

their welfare of little interest to capital and possibly the state (Bauman, 2004). Indeed, in the wake of post-apartheid South Africa's large-scale economic restructuring and in the face of the country's persistently high unemployment rate (Bernstein, 2010), many of the migrants arriving in its cities have to sustain themselves outside of regulated labour markets (Crush, 2011). And given the surplus of labour, those who are engaged in waged work often find it highly precarious and exploitative (Barchiesi, 2011).

Authors in the neoliberal tradition have done much to normalise and valorise the economic activity of "the poor" as expressions of self-reliance (Denning, 2010; Samson, 2009). Yet the above quotations suggest that self-reliance need not only signify a virtue but also powerlessness, futility and even destitution; these are some of the effects of structural violence in the lives of those who find themselves either marginalised or excluded from a given society's mainstream (Mullaly, 2010). Thus, while it is appropriate to interpret the self-reliance of poor people as expressions of some level of agency, it also reflects an absence of possibilities and choice in the lives of those who have been rendered surplus by macro-economic and political processes well beyond their control. In this respect South Africa's diverse but poor urban residents share an important commonality.

FACING OBSTACLES

Interpreting experiences of poverty, marginalisation and lack of choice as functions of being surplus, and hence a result of the socio-economic ordering of South African society, leaves as yet unresolved questions concerning the relevance of cross-border mobility for the socio-economic positioning of particular groups or persons. I begin my reflections on this with a less than clear-cut case. Léocadie suggests that she and other foreigners living off the city's markets were, possibly deliberately, side-lined to make space for competing South Africans traders:

L   *"They closed the flea market … This flea market was helping too many people. Now the people don't have space to go to sell... When you go to ask for licence to sell, 'they don't want to' give you."*

A   *"Before, there was no licence?"*

L   *"The licence started when they moved [the flea market] to another site … 'The South Africans' selling there got licence. Now us here, we do not have licence... Too much people cry."* (29.11.08)

One source from the municipality recalls the changes in municipal policy and practices referred to by Léocadie as follows:

"From the many interviews I had with refugees and asylum seekers at the time, [the re-allocation of trading spaces together with the introduction of trading licenses] was a particularly significant curtailment of livelihoods in [the city] … On paper, [the] application procedure [for trading licenses is] … non-discriminatory, [but it is] widely perceived that in practice, locals are favoured; however, I have also heard that locals perceive foreigners to be favoured." (personal communication, 30.07.13)

In short, foreigners may or may not have been treated unfairly. Importantly, however, both accounts point to competition between differently positioned groups for a scarce resource, namely access to the city's markets. In its course, South African citizenship emerged as an asset that provided those in possession of it with a sense of moral entitlement to privileged access even in the absence of a concomitant legal claim, while those lacking citizenship felt unfairly prevented from access, even in the absence of any direct proof. Yet why would trading space have become scarce when both Léocadie and the municipal official indicate that initially this had not been so? Kihato (2004:7-8) claims that street traders in Johannesburg

> "… were [regarded as] an 'eyesore' … [Moreover] the city could not control them … The … solution was to set up formal … markets where all traders would have to register … For a while, the hawkers refused to use the new market. When they finally [did] … many … said that they had lost business … Sales dropped for [those] who were unable to obtain prime positions … The added pressure of having to pay [rent] made it impossible for some to eke out a living."

She explains these developments with what she sees as a bias in South African law towards "world-class companies … big investors and global entrepreneurs" (Kihato, 2004:4). This ultimately obliterates "households whose unregulated economic strategies from below are lost" (Kihato, 2004:5), irrespective of the citizenship status of the people thus marginalised.

Beyond Léocadie's case however, do the stories considered in this article give an indication of whether, and if so, in what ways, the citizenship discourse had tangible consequences in their lives? To make my point, I use the example of how Émile lost his employment as a security guard. In 2001 South Africa's security industry became regulated in terms of the *Private Security Industry Regulation Act*. The Act stipulates that remunerated security officers must be registered with the Security Officers Board (SOB). Only permanent residents and citizens are eligible for registration (Section 23.1.a), unless the SOB decides to accredit a particular applicant "on good cause" (Section 23.6). The progressive tightening of access to this form of livelihood played itself out in Émile's story as follows:

> *"[In 1999] I starting to work, security job … No certificates, nothing. Just: 'I need a job,' 'Yes!' They just … take you …"*

> *"[In 2004], I was study to get the certificate … And I applied the SOB [licence] … My receipt … came out … After three month s… they say, they are not allowed to give foreigner the SOB … I never got the SOB."*

> *"[At] the end of 2005 [the company was sold] … The new manager … told us: 'All the foreigners, I must remove them in the company.' Us, we was thinking, 'Maybe he is joking' … He was serious! Then he was starting saying: 'Eh, bring your SOB! Bring your papers!'."* (26.11.08)

Much has been written about the circulation of nationalist-exclusionary discourses in South Africa that frame black African migrants as dangerous, a drain on resources and

therefore in need of being kept out of South Africa generally and its urban centres specifically (Crush, 2000; Crush, McDonald, Williams, Lefko-Everett, Dorey, Taylor & La Sablonniere, 2008; Neocosmos, 2008; Misago *et al.*, 2010; Hölscher & Bozalek, 2012). In addition, there is a growing body of evidence documenting how these discourses have translated into a myriad of exclusionary practices. Some of these undermine, but others are in keeping with, the country's constitutional framework and rule of law (Hölscher, 2014; Landau, 2006; Makhema, 2009; Vigneswaran, 2011). Either way, they exclude people from accessing essential opportunities and resources – not because access is illegal, but because as foreign nationals, they are framed as being outside "the universe of those entitled to consideration" (Fraser, 2008:19).

When read in conjunction therefore, Léocadie's story of marginalisation from the city's markets and Émile's eventual exclusion from the security business signify the intersectionality (Pease, 2010) of different modes of structural violence operating in South Africa's urban centres. Where authorities – purposefully or unintentionally – fall short of recognising and facilitating poor people's claims to the city's economic opportunities, and when this is coupled with a nationalist-exclusionary discourse, the resultant injustices become mutually reinforcing. Poor people find themselves pitted against each other as they compete for resources that need not be scarce, and in this context cross-border migrants find themselves additionally disadvantaged. In spite of important class-based commonalities, then, the obstacles that "the poor" need to navigate in their quest for survival are, in the case of cross-border migrants, likely to include additional layers.

LOSING HOPE, LOSING DIGNITY, CLAIMING AGENCY

Being surplus to the formal economy and peripheral to mainstream concerns gives the excluded little other option than to engage in such counter-discourses and practices, and to develop such alternative identities, forms of belonging and moral points of reference as would make life on the margins liveable. Consequently, commentators on the lived realities in the Global South have urged recognition of the ways in which the agency that lies in the survival strategies of ordinary people provides them with a degree of dignity and hope (Appandurai, 2004; Simone, 2004, 2010, 2011). Thus, it may be helpful at this point to explore the relationship between agency, dignity and hope in the lives of those who have arrived in South Africa's cities in search of livelihoods and protection. Sen (1999:11) proposes that the extent to which people are afforded the opportunity to "shape their own destiny" should be evaluated "in terms of [their] own values and objectives". By the time we met, all five participants had found it difficult to retain a positive outlook on their lives' accomplishments. Émile's sense of bleakness is typical:

> "The security guard is someone who ... failed to do something to his life ... Security guard is the 'nothing'... l was suffering how many years? Struggling, studying hard to think, 'Tomorrow I'm gonna be a someone ... I'm gonna have a better life' ... Today, I'm still a security guard ... My head is getting upset ... Why l have this problem for my heart? I'm thinking too much! Everything I am doing is 'bad!' What's wrong? Ten years, yah, ten years [Pause] No hope." (26.11.08)

Following her intricate account of hope's central importance to human survival, Walker (2006:42) suggests that hope is "an individual and social necessity". The reason for her claim is hope's dialectic connection to human agency:

> "Its nature is to engage our desire and agency … It will steer thoughts and talk … stir other feelings … press us to actions that further the likelihood of what we hope for and … strengthen those attitudes and patterns of attention that fortify our sense that the object of hope is attainable." (Walker, 2006:44-45)

It is through hoping that human beings are able to imagine themselves and the world around them as 'better than now'; and this imagining enables them to work towards social realities that are yet to be. If, on the other hand a person's sense of agency is thwarted continuously in the face of perpetual hardship and diminishing possibilities, hope – as illustrated by Émile – can run out, and with that will fail the sense of agency that hope requires to succeed (Walker, 2006).

Nussbaum (2000:71-72) recalls that "we judge frequently enough that a life has been so impoverished that it is not worthy of the dignity of a human being", and consequently asserts that the "intuitive idea" behind her approach to justice is "the human being as a dignified … being who shapes his or her life in co-operation and reciprocity with others". Yet contrary to the more optimistic interpretations offered, for example, by Appandurai (2004), De Boeck (2011) and Simone (2004, 2010, 2011), precisely this was missing from all five life stories. As such, car guarding provided Sébastien with some degree of agency, yet its defining moment was *in*dignity:

> *"This work has a lot of humiliation … Sometimes a customer treats you like a 'good-for-nothing' … but you are called to support and accept that … because if you don't do that you will be sent off … [We] don't have a word to say … We are brought to the lowest level."* (28.06.08)

Meanwhile, Bola's experienced daily living in South Africa is characterised less by reciprocity than by a sense of being completely "misrecognised" (Fraser, 2008:16). And this drained her of precisely those emotional resources she required for her continued exercise of agency:

> *"Being a foreigner is one thing, and being a black foreigner is another … Being a Nigerian foreigner is another thing again … We experience racism, we experience xenophobia … We get a measure of everything … It is very tiring … It's exhausting … and I am afraid for my kids."* (10.12.08).

Finally, finding himself destitute, Lance turned to a refugee services provider for emergency support. As is unfortunately a common feature in formal welfare services (Bozalek, 2012), recognition and co-operation were notably absent from the ensuing relationships:

> *"Their way of questioning … sort of degrades you; it humiliates you … You say your story, and somebody … says, 'I don't think you are telling the truth' … People don't take time … and you are also dealing with people who don't know*

poverty ... When you tell them that you were sleeping in the harbour with no blanket, nothing, they don't understand." (13.06.09).

Hartnack (2009:374) describes his research participants' agency as the "conscious actions of displaced people", who use that "room for manoeuvre" which remains beyond "the constraints imposed … by their post-displacement situations". I made similar observations in this study. Bola, Léocadie and Sébastien tried to attain the best possible outcomes from making existing rules work: they remained within the framework provided by dominant discourses, practices and the law. However, when "you look out onto the world and see few prospects [and] doing the right thing doesn't get you anywhere anymore", you may end up cobbling together strategies that are "impervious to collective justification" (Simone, 2010:144-145). Lance provides us with one such example. I learnt subsequent to the study that around the time of the interview he was preparing to defraud a construction company. His narration reveals that, ahead of the crime, Lance had arrived at a reasoned choice to set himself apart from mainstream morality (and its concomitant penal code), which he felt had failed him:

> *"The whole idea of coming in to beg … it was a last resort. But now I need my dignity back … I learnt how to pick up the pieces and continue … I have adjusted my thinking capacity ... When you are in control there is a bit of unfairness [but] I don't care ... I don't care whether I'm in your country ... because I'm calling the shots ... I'm running the show."* (13.06.09)

Structural violence has a tendency to reproduce itself in the lives of its victims. Often, this reaction features as interpersonal, lateral violence (Mullaly, 2010), thus remaining within the confines of society's margins and those intimate spheres of life where, if nowhere else, a residual sense of power and control, if not agency, may have survived. In the end, Émile says:

> *"I was go to kill myself … Not to live again for this world … When she make me angry … I remember all those things that used to happen for me, it is like I am crazy! I used to beat her! [Pause] … I hit her! [Pause] After that, I just calm down myself, and I … calling her [pause] and I say, 'I am so sorry'."* (26.11.08)

As an illustration of the extent to which structural violence works to undermine people's dignity and hope, always with the attendant possibility of mutation and replication in ways that turn victims into perpetrators in yet another spiral of violation, blocked opportunities and destruction, Lance's insinuations and Émile's testimony give rise to additional concerns. For they illustrate that counter-discourses and practices on the margins need be neither silent and invisible, nor take the form of organised, progressive political practice; they can also be clandestine and destructive, producing yet more victims in their wake. Importantly, both men's actions may be seen as an extension of the kinds of indignity and hopelessness that displacement – especially if followed by continued exposure to structural violence at supposed points of refuge and sustenance – can cause.

CONCLUSIONS

This article explored the implications of the life stories told by five cross-border migrants for social work and social service provision in response to displacement, cross-border migration and structural violence in urban South Africa. To this end I developed a genealogy of the different forms of agency the participants had acquired by the time we met – important for the practical application of Sen's (1999, 2009) notion of justice. I found that their categorisation as either 'refugees' or 'migrants' did not correspond well with their substantive experiences, and that they are better characterised as members of South Africa's large pool of surplus people. Yet as cross-border migrants, they also faced additional citizenship-based discourses and practices of exclusion. All in all, they presented what may be termed *cumulative agency constraints*. As a result, they experienced themselves as vulnerable, even though they were, by and large, self-reliant. This can be considered unjust in that their vulnerabilities were due to circumstances over which they had little control, caused considerable hardship and hindered their ability to become and achieve what they had the capability to be and to do. Political resentment between cross-border migrants and citizens was evident when an important resource for survival was rendered scare as a result of macroeconomic interventions. Finally, a reading of displacement, exclusion and poverty as structural violence allowed for an interpretation of the fact that two of the five study participants spoke about perpetrating violence themselves as their particular attempts to regain a sense of autonomy in the absence of the kinds of agency which Sen (1999, 2009) regards as a hallmark of justice. Arguably, it was at a point at which these two men regarded themselves as isolated, unsupported and disjointed from meaningful relationships and ceased to hope for a meaningful future that both – self-reliant to the extreme – became active participants in the spiralling injustices characterising much of the social realities in South Africa today.

These findings suggest that even when people appear to be economically self-reliant, it does not follow that social services are unnecessary, or that interventions should be limited to those unable to survive autonomously. And while I support the view that receiving refugee status might not be a good indicator of a person's welfare needs, being displaced, being foreign and being surplus probably is. Thus I agree with Valtonen (2008), Hugman (2010) and Segal (2012), who all argue for improving, not reducing, social service provision in the field of social work with cross-border migrants. A conceptual linking of the concepts of agency and vulnerability may provide a useful basis for critiquing the goals, methods and emphases of existing interventions. In this regard Robinson's (2010:132) calls for "practices … that sustain not just 'bare life' but all social life", and for "an ontology … that accepts … relationality and interdependence, and … the existence of vulnerability without reifying particular individuals [or] groups … as 'victims' or 'guardians'". Whether the current, limited provision of refugee-centred services contributes to existing tensions between South Africa's local and foreign populations remains an open empirical question. However, rather than this becoming an argument against existing provisions, I propose that any such resentment be integrated into the range of social work's interventions in this field.

Based on the findings of this study, I would like to make the following recommendations.

- There is an array of areas in which policy intervention and advocacy are required. Whatever the chosen emphasis, there should be a balance between contributing to wider civil society initiatives that intervene in the structural, socio-economic challenges afflicting South Africa as a whole and targeting those exclusionary discourses, attitudes, rules and practices that affect cross-border migrants more specifically.

- Interventions at the levels of communities and groups should respond both to the challenges facing migrant communities as a whole and to the apparent presence of inter-group conflict. This article has highlighted resentments between migrant and resident communities, but social workers also need to be mindful of those conflicts that different groups of migrants may have imported from their societies of origin.

- The interventions I would recommend for social work at the levels of individuals and families flow from the participants' narrations of displacement, trauma and loss, and the problematic outcomes these can have for people's personal wellbeing and relationships. Most certainly, these are important themes not just for refugees but other cross-border migrants as well, so the latter groups should also be eligible for such services.

Importantly, however, interventions must be aligned with the needs articulated by intended beneficiaries themselves, rather than being based primarily on aggregate assessments. Social work interventions and services could then contribute to the expansion of agency among cross-border migrants in ways that not only encompass but transcend the economic dimensions foregrounded in this debate.

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