

"A LICENSE TO LEAVE SOUTH AFRICA": A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SOUTH AFRICAN PARENTS' NARRATIVES OF THEIR CHILDREN'S REASONS FOR EMIGRATION

Sulette Ferreira, Charlene Carbonatto

The number of South Africans citizens emigrating abroad has increased dramatically, resulting in a multitude of parents remaining behind. This qualitative phenomenological study explored and described the reasons for the emigration of adult children of predominantly white South African parents. Multiple motivating factors validated the emigration, namely the South African political climate, violent crime, lack of employment opportunities and high skill mobility. In an attempt to justify the emigration, parents subsequently provided their children with a "license to leave". Each parent was affected uniquely in this complex psychosocial journey. Social workers can assist in the reconstruction of meaning by guiding the parent through this life-altering decision.

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INTRODUCTION

In today’s progressively interconnected world, international relocation or emigration, whether forced or by choice, has become a reality that touches nearly all corners of the globe. South Africa is no exception and has lost many former citizens to emigration, especially over the last two decades. This phenomenon has led to many parents being left behind in South Africa after the emigration of their child(ren). Emigration is a complex psychological and socio-cultural phenomenon that has vast repercussions, not only for the emigrant, but also for those left behind (Marchetti-Mercer, 2009:130).

RATIONALE AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

The available literature on the phenomenon of the exodus of people from South Africa has focused predominantly on its economic effects, while studies on the social and psychological impact of emigration on those remaining behind are conspicuously absent (Aviram-Freedman, 2005:10). It is against this backdrop of the ever increasing phenomenon of emigration from South Africa that the authors recognised there was a gap in the research regarding the reasons for emigration and the psychosocial impact on the parents left behind in South Africa, after the emigration of their adult child(ren). The motivation for the study gained momentum after participation of the first author as a guest speaker on a radio programme on Radio Pretoria (Minnaar, 2010), broadcast on 18 January 2010 on emigration and the emotional impact on those left behind. As a result of this broadcast, two listeners contacted the researcher and were interested in being part of such a study. The narratives of parents regarding the reasons give by their adult children for emigration, as well as the psychosocial impact of this on the ability of parents to make sense of their child’s emigration, enabled an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon and assisted in providing guidelines for social work intervention with these parents. This paper forms part of a larger doctoral study from which one theme, the reasons for emigration, generated from the thick data, is presented here.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

A qualitative research approach was used to understand, rather than explain (Schurink & Fouché, 2011:308), and to interpret through the meaning that research participants give to their life world (Schurink & Fouché, 2011:310). Since phenomenology is both a philosophy and a methodology seeking to understand social phenomena from the participant’s (actor’s) perspective, it was found to be the most appropriate design for this research. The research was consistent with the aims of a phenomenological study, as its purpose was to provide rich, in-depth narratives by the parents left behind after the emigration of their adult children.

Sampling

Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select the first participant, followed by snowball sampling to locate additional participants by asking the participants to recommend others to interview (Babbie, 1995; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Clear and specific selection criteria included: being a South African citizen; speaking fluent English; living in Gauteng province, South Africa; being a parent whose adult child(ren) had emigrated and lived abroad for at least one year; and being from any race, culture, gender; socio-economic status; and aged between 50 and 80 years. Of the 24 participants

selected, the racial representation was: 21 white, 2 black Africans and 2 Indians. The participants represented various socio-economic classes.

Data collection

The principal methods of data collection included voice recorded semi-structured face-to-face interviews, with primary and secondary questions, conducted with 24 participants, of which five interviews were with couples, using joint interviews. The interviews were conducted mostly at the place of residence of the parent; this provided additional information from sources such as photographs and personal documentation between the parent and the adult child, allowing for different data sources for triangulation purposes. Joint interviewing differs from individual interviewing because of the interaction between the participants, who usually have a pre-existing relationship (Morris, 2001:559). Taylor and De Vocht (2011:1576) confirm that in a joint interview participants can corroborate or supplement each other's stories, probe, correct, challenge, or introduce fresh themes for discussion that can result in further disclosure and richer data.

Data analysis

After data collection, the audio recordings of the 19 interviews (24 participants) were transcribed verbatim, providing rich thick data. Each interview was listened to repeatedly to give the researchers a holistic overview (Hycner, 1985:281; Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011:409). The authors determined all the categories, themes and sub-themes, by reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews, re-affirming the categorisation of topics. The units of meaning relating to the phenomenon within each of these topics were then identified for intensive examination (Hycner, 1985).

ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data-analysis program, was used to facilitate data analysis, as it does not analyse data automatically, but assists in organising the data. ATLAS.ti was especially useful in retrieving coded data, which aided the researchers in structuring the details, identifying patterns within the data, selecting the themes and sub-themes, grouping the quotations and facilitating the use of direct quotations to enrich the data presentation.

Trustworthiness was ensured through applying the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Strategies used included triangulation with different sources of data and reflexivity in the form of journal writing to create self-awareness and reduce bias during the research process and after it was completed. Peer debriefing involves the process of engaging in dialogue with colleagues outside of a research project who have experience with the topic, population or methods being utilised (Lietz, Langer & Furman, 2006:451). Peer debriefing was used "for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:308). Colleagues and other professionals in the fields of social work, psychology, research and emigration were peer debriefers, with one independent person who was not a participant, but whose son had emigrated. Member checking was done with a number of participants in a follow-up interview and an audit trail was maintained to track the research process, which is an important part of establishing rigour in qualitative work, as it describes the research procedures (Lietz et al., 2006:450).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered strictly to the ethical standards of social science research, as set out by Strydom (2011), with the university Research Ethics Committee granting the ethics approval. Researchers have an ethical obligation to protect participants from emotional harm (Strydom, 2011:115), which is difficult to predict. Participants were debriefed after each interview (Strydom, 2011:122), as these debriefing sessions are the ideal time to complete the learning experience that began with agreeing to participate and to minimise the potential of possible emotional harm to them. Furthermore, the letter of informed consent indicated participants' rights, the purpose of the study, procedures to be adopted, potential risks and benefits of participation, expected duration of the study, extent of confidentiality of personal identification, and demographic data (Groenewald, 2004). Participation in this study was

entirely voluntary. Confidentiality of personal information obtained during the interview was assured by assigning a pseudonym to each participant to protect his or her identity.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Scant research, especially in the South African context, is available concerning the parents' subjective perspectives on their children's reasons for emigration and the psychosocial impact of this on the ability of the parents to make sense of their child's emigration. Thus literature on similar studies had to be relied on, but in different contexts. This phenomenological study included a small sample of 24 participants, the majority of whom were white South Africans. This small sample size had a clear effect on the generalisability of the research findings (Frazier, Tix & Barron, 2004:115).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of South African emigration statistics

Reliable and up-to-date emigration data are generally hard to find. This is particularly true for the South African scenario (Höppli, 2014:4). There is no official agency that collects emigration data; hence verification on South African emigration statistics is problematic. Emigration statistics are available from three key sources: Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2018, the United Nations International Migrant Stock database, and the National Statistics Offices (NSOs) of foreign nations (Buckham, 2019).

During the late 1990s permanent emigration from South Africa increased dramatically, reaching a historical high of 58 000 in 1999. Data published by Statistics South Africa (BusinessTech, 2016) through its Community Survey indicated that the biggest proportion of emigrants since 2000 left during 2015 (25.7%). The most recent figures on emigration come from Stats SA's Community Survey 2016, a large-scale survey conducted between censuses. The survey showed that 97 460 South Africans had moved abroad since 2006 (Zamayriha, 2019).

On average, roughly 23 000 people emigrate from South Africa per year. (Buckham, 2019). The United Nations International Migrant Stock database gives the number of South African-born persons residing outside of South Africa as having increased from 330 000 in 1990 to 900 000 in 2017 – an average of 21,000 South Africans leaving the country per year. Professor David Kaplan and Thomas Höppli from the University of Cape Town School of Economics conducted a private study in 2017 using National Statistics Office (NSO) data and found that the number of South Africans residing in 31 countries had increased from 435 000 in 2000 to 820 000 in 2017, again implying an average of 23,000 people leaving South Africa per year (Buckham, 2019).

MOTIVATING FACTORS BEHIND SOUTH AFRICAN EMIGRATION

The decision to emigrate is based on diverse factors. Emigration scholars have identified the “push-pull” model of emigration. The “push” out of the country of origin often emerges from the internal conditions in the home country and intensifies with the personal circumstances of individuals. The “pull” towards another country works in tandem with the push from the home country (Segal, Mayada & Elliot, 2006:7). Other theories emphasize a broader spectrum of economic and social conditions as motivators of out-migration (De Haas, 2010). In the South African context this was found to be evident.

Transnational migration literature shows that the experience of social and economic conditions in their own countries provided the major impetus for skilled, middle-class and predominantly white South Africans to emigrate, more so than the pull factors in the receiving countries (Forrest, Johnston & Poulsen, 2013).

The following motivating factors for emigration by South African citizens were highlighted in relevant research: multiple reasons, high skill mobility, political reasons, violent crime and unemployment. Reasons given by parents overlap with those given by Fourie (2018), namely, “poor economic growth;

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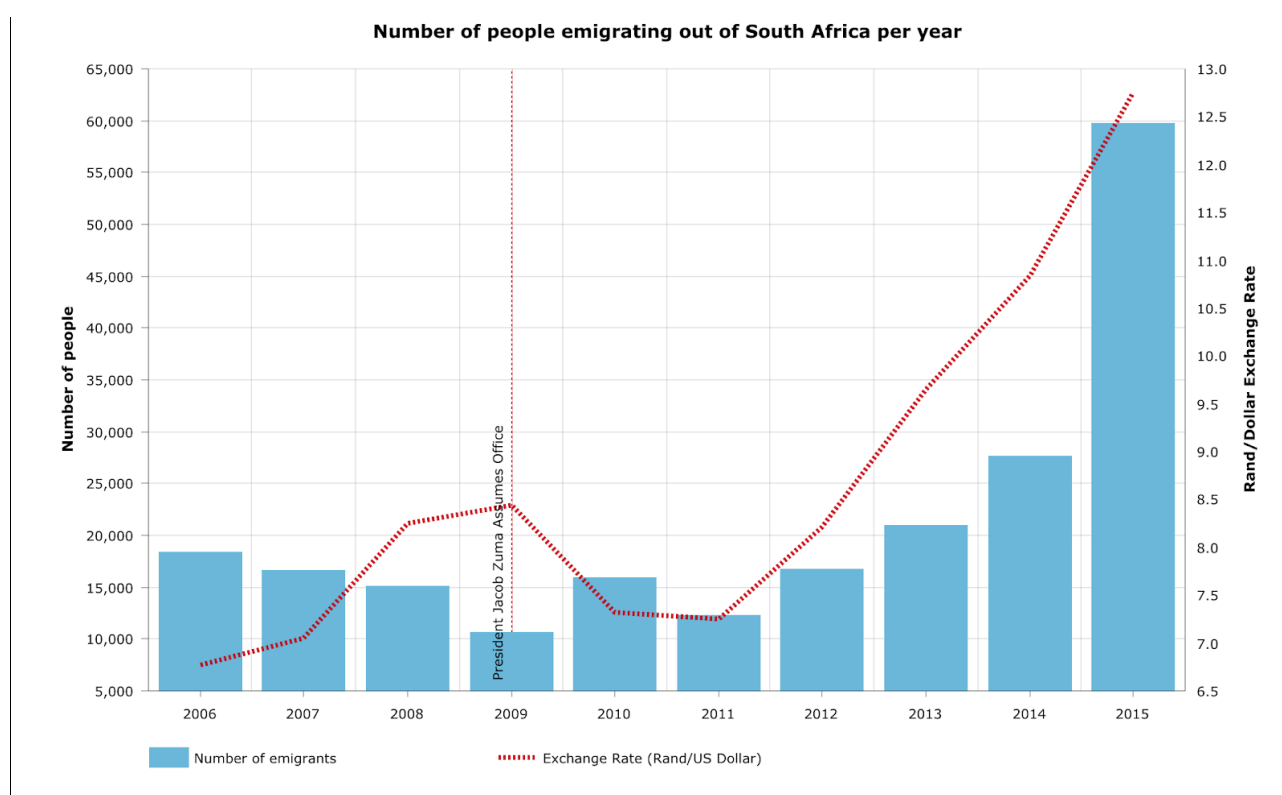
concerns about safety and security; rhetoric about land redistribution; a change to The Constitution; and public and private sector corruption”.

South African politics as catalyst for emigration

Political disruptions can be instrumental in increasing dissatisfaction. Mattes and Richmond (2000:29-30) stated: “The most well-known politically-motivated migration is the flight from oppression and persecution, or political turmoil and instability.” When there are fundamental changes in political power in a nation, or when power structures shift drastically, or when individuals come into conflict with political ideologies, the temptation to emigrate become strong (cf.Segal et al., 2006:4).

To comprehend emigration from within the South African context, an overview of the political situation is essential. Statistics reveal that there is a direct connection between the political climate, the currency exchange rate and emigration from South Africa. Figure 1 shows the number of people emigrating out of South Africa per year between 2006 and 2016.

FIGURE 1
NUMBER OF PEOPLE EMIGRATING OUT OF SOUTH AFRICA PER YEAR



Source: Maynard, 2016.

Political disruptions were an important motivating push factor behind the emigration of professionals from South Africa before 1994, when the country held its first democratic election. Van Rooyen (2000:11) has described the history of emigration from South Africa in terms of waves. The *first wave* of emigrants was in 1949-1951 when the National Party came to power and began implementing apartheid policies; the *second wave* was in 1960-1961, during a period of political unrest and the Sharpeville massacre, the proclamation of a state of emergency and South Africa’s departure from the Commonwealth. The *third wave* was in 1976-1979 with the Soweto uprising and further harsh counter-measures adopted by the state. The *fourth wave* occurred in 1985-1987, a period that was characterized by sanctions and the collapse of the South African currency (ZAR, rand). In 1993, one year before the democratic elections of 1994, emigration doubled and after that it remained close to 10 000 per year, for the rest of the 1990s (Van Rooyen, 2000:11).

South African violent crime as catalyst for emigration

Statistics reveal that most South Africans list crime as their number-one motivating factor and those who decide to emigrate list “improved safety and security” as the top reason for leaving (Fourie, 2018).

Statistics SA (2018) released key findings from the Victims of Crime Survey (VOCS) 2017/18 conducted between April 2017 and March 2018. Household crime occurrences in 2017/18 accounted for an estimated 1.5 million incidences, an increase of 5% compared to the previous year:

- Incidents of crime on individuals are estimated to be over 1,6 million, which is an increase of 5% from the previous year;
- Housebreaking or burglary accounted for 54% of all household crimes and continued to be the dominant type of crime in 2017/18;
- Housebreaking increased by 7%; an estimated 832 122 incidents occurred;
- Murder increased by about 4% from 2016/17 – an estimated 6 908 incidences of murder occurred in 2017/18.

In 2019 a total of 2.01 million crimes were recorded, murder increased by 3.4% and sexual offences showed a drastic increase, up 4.6% from 2018. In terms of sexual offences, the country has seen another drastic increase in reported crimes, up by 4.6% from the previous year. These statistics cover all reported crimes between 1 April 2018 and March 2019 (BusinessTech, 2019a). Violent crime and homicide are among the worst in the world in South Africa, with a murder rate of 35.7 murders per 100,000 population, making it the ninth most violent country in the world and the second most violent in Africa, behind Lesotho (37.5) (Haden, 2016).

Davis (2018) confirms that murders of farmers represented just over 0.3% of all killings in South Africa in 2017. Farm murders or attacks refers to violent crimes committed on isolated farms in rural areas. In the period between 2000 and 2009 farm attacks increased by 22% (1,407 attacks).

Commenting on crime statistics, Dolley (2017) quotes the Minister of Police in 2017, Fikile Mbalula as stating:

“Crime involves high emotions. We must not see statistics purely as numbers. Behind the numbers are real feelings, real lives, real harm, real losses, hurt and feelings of [being unsafe].”

Evans (2019) reported the latest crime statistics in South Africa in *Business Day*, emphasizing the situation with a headline: “South Africa is at war with itself”, where President Cyril Ramaphosa is quoted saying: “The latest crime statistics show that the situation in South Africa is quite bad”.

Unemployment as catalyst for emigration

South Africa has the fifth highest unemployment rate in the world (Trading Economics, 2019). The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS), released by Statistics SA (2019), confirms the unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2019 to have increased from 29% by 0.1%, to 29.1%. Compared to the second quarter of 2019, the number of employed persons increased by 62 000 while the number of unemployed persons thus increased by 78 000 to 141 000. South Africa’s unemployment is the highest in eleven (11) years with a total of 6.7 million unemployed people in SA (White, 2019). There are various arguments about the causes of unemployment in South Africa, some of which include the changing face of the population, which has had an impact on employment patterns in the country. The population stood at 40.5 million during the first all-race census in 1996 and by 2011 it had grown to 51.7 million. By midyear 2019, Statistics SA estimate the midyear population to be at 58.78 million (RSA, 2019).

The labour force survey for the second quarter of 2019 showed that the economy added 25 000 jobs, compared to a year ago, but the labour force increased by 598 000 work seekers. This statistic implies

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that only one job was available for every 24 people who entered the labour market the previous year (Kruger, 2019).

High skill mobility

Although definitions of skilled people vary, they all tend to focus on those who have received some kind of specialised training that results in superior technical competence (Mattes & Richmond, 2000:12). Increased emigration of skilled workers raises the issue of a “brain drain” (Lowell, 2008:52), which implies a reduction of skilled people who are vital to the functional core of a national economy (McDonald & Crush, 2000:5). The United Nations defines the now well-established concept of a “brain drain” as a one-way movement of highly skilled people from developing countries to the developed countries that exclusively benefits the industrialised (host) world (Oberoi & Lin, 2006). Okoye (2019) wrote: “Pew Research estimates at least 900 000 people born in South Africa were living in other countries in 2017, with many of these people being skilled and educated.” South Africa’s brain drain continues as skilled workers are leaving for popular emigration destinations such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia (Okoye, 2019).

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF EMIGRATION ON THE PARENTS LEFT BEHIND

In her study on the social and psychological effect of an adult child’s emigration on non-immigrant Asian Indian elderly parents, Miltiades (2002:33) found that the absence of an emigrant child appears to have a negative effect on the parent’s psychological wellbeing:

... since the parents feel that their children have better lives in America, in terms of economic and career development, they suppress their wish for their child’s return so that the child’s family will prosper. This is consistent with the values of harmony and tolerance within family relationships.

An international workshop held in 2005 in Hanoi, Vietnam, confirmed Miltiades’s (2002) point, with the emphasis on the health and social impacts of emigration on the “left-behind” family and community. The workshop’s closing statement sums it up: “While there are a few studies on the socio-economic impacts of migration on the population left behind, the number of studies on the psychological impacts of migration on the population left behind is even scarcer” (Nguyen, Toyota & Yeoh, 2006:5).

A number of studies have explored the influence of the adult children’s emigration on the health of older parents left behind. Emigration of young people has negative consequences for ageing parents, including loneliness, isolation and loss of basic support. Antman (2010) found that migration leads to worsened levels of emotional wellbeing of elderly parents left behind, while Mosca and Barrett (2016) emphasized that it is particularly mothers whose emotional health deteriorates when a child emigrates. A review study of 25 articles by Thapa, Visentin, Kornhamer and Cleary (2018) focused on the relationship between the emigration of adult-children and the mental health of the parents older than 50 years who are left behind. This study revealed that being left behind is negatively associated with the mental health of older adults.

The available literature on the phenomenon of the exodus of professionals from South Africa has focused predominantly on its economic effects and the losses in expertise in the health and technology sectors, while studies on the social and psychological impact of emigration on those remaining behind are conspicuously absent (Aviram-Freedman, 2005:10). Marchetti-Mercer (2009:130) explained that emigration is a complex psychological and socio-cultural phenomenon that has enormous impact, not only on those who leave the country, but also on those who have to deal with the aftermath of this decision.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Profile of research participants (parents)

The demographic information was gathered from the face-to-face unstructured interviews. Participants were assigned an interview number (pseudonym). Couples interviewed jointly were indicated as 1a (male) and 1b (female). The participant profiles are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS						
Participant Number	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children	Number of Children Emigrated	Emigration Destination
Interview 01 (wife of P5)	Female	65	Married	1S; 1D	1D Married	Australia
Interview 02	Female	79	Married	2S; 1D	1S Married	USA
Interview 03	Female	52	Divorced	1S	1S Single	United Kingdom
Interview 04 *	Male (a)	59	Married	2S; 1D	1S Single	United Kingdom
	Female (b)	57				
Interview 05 (husband of P1)	Male	66	Married	(as P1)	(as P1)	(as P1)
Interview 06	Female	64	Married	2D	1D Married 1D Single	Australia Australia
Interview 07	Female	78	Married	3S; 1D	1D Married	Canada
Interview 08	Female	57	Divorced	2S; 1D	1S Married	New Zealand
Interview 09	Female	62	Divorced	2S; 1D	1D Single	United Kingdom
Interview 10*	Male (a)	72	Married	4D	1D Married	Australia
	Female (b)	76				
Interview 11	Male	65	Married	3S	1S Single	USA
Interview 12	Female	74	Widow	1S; 2D	1S Married 1D Married	Australia USA
Interview 13*	Male (a)	66	Married	1S; 1D	1D Married	New Zealand
	Female (b)	68				
Interview 14	Male	69	Married	3D	1D Married	Australia
Interview 15*	Male (a)	76	Married	1S; 2D	1D Married	Australia
	Female (b)	79				
Interview 16	Female	56	Married	3S; 2D	1S Single 1S Single 1D Single	United Kingdom United Kingdom UAE
Interview 17	Female	63	Widow	2S	1S Single 1S Single	UAE UAE
Interview 18	Female	65	Widow/ Remarry	2S	1S Married 1S Married	Australia Australia
Interview 19*	Male (a)	79	Married	2S	1S Married 1S Married	China Europe
	Female (b)	76				

S=Son; D=Daughter

***Parent couples interviewed together**

Table 1 shows the majority of participants interviewed were female (16), aged 52 to 79 years and were married (15). Six (6) of the participants had more than one child who had emigrated. Of these children only 2 sets of children, emigrated to the same destination. The other children emigrated to different

destinations which lead to even more financial and other implications for the parents left behind, see interview 19 where the one child emigrated to China and the other to Europe.

The racial representation of the 24 participants selected was : 21 white, 2 black Africans and 2 Indians. The participants came from various socio-economic classes. The socio-economic status refers to the social standing of an individual or a group and is determined according to their level of education, income and occupation (American Psychological Association, 2019).

The emigration destinations of the 25 adult children were firstly Australia, secondly the United Kingdom, thirdly the United States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In recent years, the United Arab Emirates has become a popular destination for South African emigrants (Höppli, 2014:5).

Emigration destination and qualification of the adult child who emigrated

TABLE 2
EMIGRATION DESTINATION OF 25 ADULT CHILDREN

Emigration Destination	Number of adult-children Emigrated
Australia	9
United Kingdom	5
United States of America	3
United Arab Emirates	3
New Zealand	2
China	1
Europe	1
Canada	1

The qualifications of the 25 children who emigrated were as follows: 10 had tertiary degree qualifications, 10 had some form of tertiary training, while 4 had completed secondary school and 1 had not. The participants represented various socio-economic classes. Fifteen adult children were married (60%), 3 were single females (12%) and 7 were single males (28%).

In their research, New World Emigration (2015) indicated the following demographic details of their emigrants and prospective emigrants: 64% were males, 36% were females, 76% were married or in a common-law relationship, 24% were single, 62% had at least one dependent child under the age of 18 and 38% had no children. Some similarities can be seen, such as the majority being males, and the majority that were married.

Thematic analysis

One theme from the main study is discussed for the purposes of this article, namely, Theme 1: Emigration of the adult-child, together with its sub-themes, supported by verbatim quotations from the interviews and literature to substantiate the findings.

THEME 1: EMIGRATION OF THE ADULT CHILD	
Sub-theme 1. 1	Defining emigration
Sub-theme 1. 2	Reasons for emigration
Sub-theme 1. 3	Parents' involvement in the decision-making process

THEME 1: EMIGRATION OF THE ADULT CHILD

Sub-theme 1.1 Defining emigration

The most visually descriptive definition of emigration was articulated by a mother whose only daughter had emigrated:

“The thing, it is like a live organism, it shrinks and grows, and it ... I would like to say almost like an amoeba, and then it pushes out a thing here and then that thing comes back ... and it is ... It is, it is a living thing that changes constantly.”

Using a metaphor to compare emigration to an amoeba shows how dynamic emigration can be for all involved. Naturalists of earlier times named the amoeba after the Greek god Proteus who was capable of changing his shape (BiologyWise, 2018). Like the amoeba, the process emigration is characterised by constant change, from the time that the child decides to emigrate; the process of change is set in motion for all role players.

Pauline Boss (1993:368), highlights this theme and explains that emigration is a systemic interactional phenomenon that never really ends. The family comprises the system left behind, but it also includes – at least in their minds – the emigrant who has settled in a new environment. Boss (1993:365-378) furthermore explains that emigration provides an example of ambiguous loss, which she describes as “an incomplete and uncertain loss” (Boss, 1999:3).

Sub-theme 1.2 *Reasons for emigration*

A major life event can develop from multiple incidents and interpretations of a situation, and in any attempt to grasp the significance of this life-changing event, searching for explanations or reasons is one of the first steps. During the interviews various reasons for the emigration of their child(den) were given from the parents’ subjective perspectives. The researchers were aware that these are not necessarily the reasons the child might have given for emigrating.

The reasons for emigration as derived from the interviews will be presented under a series of headings below.

Multiple reasons

From the research it was evident that all of the participants gave more than one reason for their children’s emigration. Participants would initially give a reason for emigration and later during the interview, they would mention additional reasons or elaborate on previous reasons. Marchetti-Mercer (2012:251) also suggests that there is no single reason driving people to emigrate, but rather a complex interaction of factors. Safety and security, education, South Africa’s weak currency, the lack of job opportunities and the political instability are still the main driving force behind the high emigration figures in South Africa (Daniel, 2018). Sable International’s Andrew Rissik states that people are leaving for many reasons – two of the most significant reasons being economic uncertainty and crime (BusinessTech, 2019b).

“... then they started looking around all over the world. Also in England ... but in any case they eventually received a good offer from Australia and that is why he accepted it. I think, well, that must have been the big reason, crime and the children’s education. Because I think, the job opportunity and experience, it is ... but not necessarily. I think the work as such, was third, it was not really about that.” (Participant P13b)

High skill mobility

High skill mobility refers to educated individuals with high levels of professional competence who emigrate to enhance their careers in countries that are able to accommodate their level of expertise (Segal et al., 2006:7). It was evident in this study that many professional people had emigrated.

“... no, no, he actually went over, he was invited to read a paper at a congress by his professor that he qualified under. And when he was there the professor offered him this job, in a group of doctors doing transplants, but he is the intensive care doctor. Then he came back and told us that he had been offered this job.” (Participant 02)

The movement of health professionals from South Africa is part of a broader global trend that has recently been described as “a dominant pattern of international emigration and a major aspect of Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk 2020:56(3)

globalization” (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012:681-730). Destination country statistics shed further light on the emigration of health professionals from South Africa. In Australia, South Africa was the fourth largest source of overseas doctors, accounting for 2,000 (or 3%) of the nearly 60,000 doctors in 2010. In 2009, 40% of all South African physicians who entered Canada were specialists (Crush, Chikanda, Bourgeault, Labonté & Murphy, 2014). Medical insurance CEO, Craig Comrie, stated that members of the medical insurance Profmed are mainly health professionals, of whom 17% leave each year. This rose to 30% in June and July 2019 (BusinessTech, 2019c).

Political reasons

Political instability is a major factor pushing South Africans to leave (BusinessTech, 2018).

“... other things also became obvious, the quality of education, quality of tertiary education, then already there was a preference for, say for example, you apply for medicine, preference for students who possibly did not have the means or the results of white students. There was the, the transformation was on course and these were all things which they took into consideration. And looking back, I cannot blame them and to a certain degree it is a comfort to me that they are there.” (Participant 14)

: “... before the ‘new’ government and he also said he could not believe that things had actually deteriorated and that regrets so terribly that it was unbelievable. And that is when both of them decided that their future would be in Australia ... we can’t see ourselves working, you know, under the circumstances.” (Participant 10a)

: “... it was very hard for him too, but you know, for him it was on a personal level, very tough. But in terms of what had happened in our country, the take-over as he calls it. It was incredibly difficult for him to accept that these wonderful, useful people, the loss of them and he was embittered. Not really so much against their leaving, but against the circumstances that drove them away. And in a certain way he is actually still embittered.” (Participant 07)

“... but in the end I just summarised it and said it is ... I do not mourn because my children are gone, I mourn because my children have to leave. It is terrible for me that we are in a country today where it is better for your children to go away.” (Participant 05)

“When nations change in political power, when power structures alter, or individuals disagree with political ideologies, the climate is ripe for emigration”(Segal et al., 2006:4). Marchetti-Mercer (2012:377) aptly states that the South African emigration experience remains worth examining, because it has some unique characteristics.

Unemployment

Participants mentioned that children struggled to find employment. Employment has been declining steadily in South Africa over the past two decades. South Africa’s unemployment rate is high for both youths and adults (Kubheka, 2018).

: “... [man] and then he paid him off, and that is why I decided I was going to force him to go. [wife]: And ... yes and he then also ... [man] ... Totally on his own feet. I forced him to go because he could not get work here and regularly he would just lie around at home because he had no job. Then I forced him to go overseas.” (Participants P4a & b)

Violent crime

Living in South Africa, the authors are aware of the high violent crime statistics; however, it is a daunting experience to hear about the experiences first-hand, as described by so many of the participants. To experience a parent describing the ordeal of their daughter being raped or being brutally attacked is emotionally challenging. Connecting a name or a face to these statistics gave new meaning to the extremely high incidence of violence. Rich descriptions of emotional and physical pain were provided.

"... they were out that early that evening, they went to church and uh ... 'R' had to force open the gate. And uh ... when he got out of the car to press it, there was a gun. They then let him lie on the ground. He said, mom I heard that gun click. Yes, and he screamed at them all also, jump out of the car and uh ... they got out, but 'C' was obviously the last to get out she is just she still wanted to close the door behind him. And the car ... she ended up under the car." (Participant 18)

"... and that is quite simply the worst thing that can happen to your child, I cannot imagine something worse, except she could be dead ... that is probably worse ... but in this country we have become grateful for little things, which is really absurd that we need to be grateful for them. I am grateful my daughter is not dead ... she has just been raped. Is it not awful that I am just too glad that she has just been raped and not murdered? This is terribly awful! The same thing, this poor man whose child was murdered, the opposite has now again happened to her, she was murdered, she was not raped but murdered. You know, is it not awful that in the end you are glad about something, because the alternative is so bad that you are glad about something terrible also, which is at least not like the other thing. Now it is tragic that this is happening to our country." (Participant 5)

One adult child vowed never to return to South Africa, not even to visit, so the act of emigration has become something final and irrevocable. Participant 8 said her child and his family would never come back to South Africa, since being victims of a serious crime incident, namely armed robbery, had been the main reason for their emigration. This is very difficult for the parents to deal with, especially if they are not in a financial position to visit the child.

: "... he will never come back again. Never! He said it to me before he left, Mom I will never come back. He said never come back to South Africa, never!" (Participant 8)

Safety and security is the number one reason why South Africans want to emigrate from South Africa (New World Immigration, 2015). Oosthuizen and Ehlers (2007:16) explain that when people experience a deficiency in the way their safety needs are met, this may trigger a decision to leave their country in search of a safer homeland. When conditions in the home country are satisfactory and satisfy physical, social and emotional needs, the likelihood of leaving is minimal. When the main reason for the child's leaving was a crime, the parents justified their decision by saying that the children had no other choice and that they were better off in a country other than South Africa. Some of the parents dealt with their child's emigration by rationalising that their children were safer abroad

Sub-theme 1.3 Parents' involvement in the decision-making process

This prelude to emigration began when the first concrete steps towards a commitment to emigrate are taken by the adult child(ren). The onset of the emigration experience for the parent left behind was when they were informed by their adult child that they were either contemplating emigration or had already made the decision. The time span of this stage varies with the circumstances.

"... so that was now that and of course I actually knew they were on their way to Australia, because they had paved the way for this and I never blamed them. It is a very difficult thing for us the fact that our daughter is there and our grandchildren who grew up in our house."(Participant 5)

"... then 'N' discussed it with us and we said, Well, you know we had chased hopes for you that you will be with us and that you will spend you know you will start working here and you live with us and you can start your surgery with us and we bought another house in 'E' quite a big house ... we gave her a farewell and she went over to Australia and when she landed in Australia of course they have to write an exam." (Participant 10)

Whether the parents were involved in the decision-making process or not, it had a profound impact on parents' adaptation to the emigration of their adult child(ren). Those involved in the decision-making
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process showed less resistance to the child's decision to emigrate and accepted the emigration of their adult child more positively. Baldassar (2007:280) found that those individuals whose emigration was supported as appropriate life courses by themselves and their families were likely to enjoy less fractious transnational family relationships than those individuals whose emigration met with disapproval. Most parents in the study accepted the adult child's decision to emigrate and it made their own adjustment to the idea a little easier.

Some parents who were not involved in the emigration decision-making process experienced the decision with shock and disbelief, and felt excluded from this important life-changing decision. Being involved in the emigration decision-making process of the adult child can be a reflection on the attachment relationship between them. The quality of the parent-child relationship before the emigration is a good indicator of the relationship after the emigration. The separation of emigration can strike deeply at unresolved separation issues. If they have a mature and open relationship, they should be able to discuss important issues such as the decision to emigrate. Being involved in the decision-making process might thus not diminish the experience of loss, but might assist in preparing the parent for the emigration process right from the onset.

DISCUSSION OF THEMES - NEGOTIATING A LICENSE TO LEAVE

Each parent's emigration journey was unique with its own psychosocial challenges and emotions. Emigration is seldom a singular affair; it needs to be regarded as an interpersonal phenomenon (Falicov, 2007). The way in which the parents attempted to make sense of this life-changing decision, based on the reasons as given by their children, had an effect on their emigration journey. Similar to these findings, Jennifer Mason's research involved people who have moved transnationally from relatives, especially from their parents, and thus had the experience of living near and far from their relatives. Mason (1999:171) examined how the parents related to the reasons given for the emigration. A significant finding from her research was identified as "legitimacy of purpose", meaning "legitimacy of purpose not only in the eyes of the emigrant, but in the eyes of the significant others." Jennifer Mason's legitimacy of purpose relates to Baldassar's (2007:280) license to leave. The notion of license to leave argues that the manner in which the emigrant, the family members and the community in the home country view the emigrant's decision to move greatly impacts on the transnational family relations (Baldassar, 2007). Baldassar (2007) developed the notion of license to leave to help clarify the countless and multifaceted factors that have an impact on the emigration experience for those left behind.

: "... for me it is almost as much of a catastrophe as the personality, the thing with my children I experience personally, the disaster that things are going the way they are in our country that ... and it is such a pity that these people have left this country and that this country has lost them and for me it is such a pity." (Participant 5)

"... and looking back, I cannot blame them and to a certain degree it is a comfort to me that they are there." (Participant 14)

"... it was difficult for them. Oh yes, it was. Financially they are now much better off and for me it is wonderful that I now know that financially it is going well." (Participant 15)

Externalising the reason for their child's emigration was part of some of the participants' coping mechanisms. If violent crime and the enforcement of affirmative action were perceived as the main reasons for emigration – it gave the parents the right to blame an outside force, in this case the country's current political and socio-economic climate, and thus the government. Parents were found to be accepting of their child's decision to emigrate when it was done to enhance their professional career and/or to improve their financial status and lifestyle. After weighing up the benefits and shortcomings of emigration, some parents were content to give their child(ren) a license to leave. Yet giving this license did not take away from the parent's feelings of loss and sadness.

” ... and it was a great sadness when they left, but this is what they wanted and we have to accept it even though it was, it was not easy because anytime you love anybody for them to move so far away is not easy.” (Participant 2)

There are many examples of parents who clearly felt an obligation to support their children, even though they had opposed (at least initially) their children’s decision to emigrate. Specifically when the children were involved in violent crime, the parents believed that it was better for the children to emigrate than to stay in South Africa. They felt that the children had a better future abroad living in a crime-free environment and having educational opportunities for their grandchildren. In most instances, the parents confirmed how difficult it was to be without the children, but that the children were better off. Therefore they believed their children had made the right decision. This mature attitude of the parent seemed to create a safe environment for the children to explore and make a meaningful life in a new country.

Some of the parents who were not involved in the emigration decision-making process responded with shock and disbelief and felt excluded from this important life-changing decision. Not being involved in the decision-making process made it harder for the parents to accept the decision of the children to emigrate. ‘Hiding’ the decision from the parents and/or waiting too long to inform them made it difficult for the parent to adapt to the idea of the child emigrating.

“... and we then went to eat and we barely had the food in front of us when she said to me we are leaving for Canada in six weeks’ time. ‘F’ got a job. For me it was like a death bell ringing.” (Participant 7)

Parents who were involved in the decision-making process showed less resistance to the child’s decision to emigrate. Being involved in the decision-making process might not necessarily diminish the experience of loss, but might assist in preparing the parent for the emigration process right from the onset. It was deduced that when an adult child engaged parents in the emigration decision-making process, this indicated the sound quality of the parent and adult-child relationship. If it was a mature relationship with open communication, the adult child felt confident to involve the parent in these discussions. Those parent felt that their opinions were acknowledged and were supportive of the child’s decision, although it did not diminish their feelings of dismay or loss. Other parents reflected that it was not their decision to make and that the child was old enough to lead his/her own life.

Some parents experienced a sense of pride that their children were able to compete internationally. The participants’ pain in dealing with the loss was softened by knowing that their children were functioning well and were happy in their new surroundings.

“... you know I, I asked the Lord that they should go. You know I really, before they even started talking about uh ... they would go, ... I started saying, I want them there. I want, you know with the little girls especially, ... I don’t want something to happen to them here, and at that stage they had already been hijacked. So yes, ... my prayers were answered ... I will tell you ... the first time probably two or three months ... after they left I could not touch a child or even look without crying ... [very emotional] yes, but life goes on. I prayed for it. And uh ... later on I said to people I prayed that they should go, now I can’t suddenly say to the Lord, I made a mistake.” (Participant 18)

CONCLUSION

The decision to emigrate is multifaceted and multi-layered, so more than one reason is involved in justifying such an important life-changing decision. A general overview of South African emigration statistics revealed that emigration occurs in waves as response to, among other things, the fraught political situation, high crime rates and high skill mobility. This has an impact on factors motivating South Africans to leave. Although a small sample was involved in this study, the results suggest that

the reasons given for emigration from South Africa are multi-dimensional and the departure has a significant impact on the parent left behind, who has to deal with the aftermath of this life-changing decision. South African emigration has few advantages for the parent, apart from the fact that they believe it is in the best interests of their child(ren).

The motivating factors behind emigration partly determined how the parent came to terms with their child leaving the country. If the sole reason was the current socio-political climate and instability in the country, they experienced the loss as forced upon them for reasons beyond their control. If their child was exposed to violent crime and it was the deciding factor, they blamed the government and people in positions of power for their loss, and felt very bitter and enraged. If the reason to emigrate was to enhance their financial and/or professional position and career, the parents were more accepting of the decision and justified it by saying the child would be better off living in a new country. The parents further justified the decision to leave by explaining that it was much safer for the children in their new destination country. These reasons made it easier for the parent to accept the emigration, as they believed that it was in the best interest of the child not to reside in South Africa. Knowing that their children are now in a safe environment justified the emigration.

Motivating factors in the South African environment vary. Crime played a role in many of the children's decision to emigrate. This added another dimension to the parents' adaptation process. Rape, armed robbery and other kinds of crime 'forced' the children to leave, which left the parent with other unresolved issues. Most parents considered the advantages and disadvantages of emigration, and believed the child(ren) would be better off and therefore felt they could give "permission" for them to leave. In their minds it "legitimised" the decision of the child(ren) to emigrate and it gave them a license to leave. Parents tried not to make the child feel guilty about leaving the country and mostly supported his/her new endeavour, although it caused them sadness and heartache. The emigration left emptiness and an immense void in their lives that they tried to comprehend and accept to the best of their abilities. Because of the inherent nature of ambiguous loss, there is no one-size-fits-all model for social workers to help parents cope with its multifaceted stressors.

With the increasing number of people emigrating from South Africa, social workers and other health care professionals will come across a growing number of transnational families. It is therefore important to take note of the process involved and the emotional effect of emigration especially on those left behind, in order to develop adequate strategies in intervening.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the parents be informed of a child's decision to emigrate as soon as possible in order for them to adjust to this life-changing decision. If the parents are involved from the outset of the decision-making phase, they have time to adjust and be involved in the process of the child's emigration, as opposed to dealing with a shocking revelation that the children will be departing soon, leaving the parents ill-prepared or not prepared at all prepared for this new phase and the reality of facing their advanced years without the assistance of their children.

Parents who supported their children's emigration decision and gave them a "licence to leave" are likely to enjoy less strenuous transnational family relationships than those parents who could not let go and thus not support their children's decision to leave. Supporting the children's decision to emigrate and thus creating a supportive environment for the children during the first phase of their emigration journey could in turn even enhance transnational relations. Emigration is becoming a South African reality that needs to be dealt with in order to safeguard family networks across continents. Social workers can play an important role in this regard.

The reason for emigration was almost always the opening sentence in the parent's description of their child's emigration journey. These reasons paved the way for the parents' understanding of the emigration process and were the first stepping-stone towards making sense of their loss after the child has emigrated. Nietzsche (Frankl, 2009) wrote: "He who has a why to live for, can bear almost any

how.” The parent needs to understand why the child has emigrated and importantly that it was the child’s decision and the parent thus had no control over this decision. In understanding the reason for emigration, the social worker can assist the parent to commence on the journey of reconstructing meaning for themselves.

Developing an intervention programme to educate and inform parents left behind about the concept of ambiguous loss and the emotional cost of emigration is important. When parents obtain the necessary insight into what to expect during the emigration process, they might be better equipped in dealing with the aftermath of their child’s emigration. Because of the inherent nature of ambiguous loss, it is recommended that intervention strategies should be tailor-made to suit each unique instance.

It is recommended that the adult children assist the parent in creating efficient communication systems before they emigrate in order to stay in contact by, for example, acquiring a laptop, internet and a cell phone to communicate through such channels as WhatsApp, Skype or Google Meet. Social workers need to emphasise the importance of remaining in contact and encouraging parents to maintain multiple links to social networks and to master the latest communication technologies to stay in touch with their children and grandchildren. Ideally these communication networks should be in place before the children relocate. Practical aspects and problems need to be discussed before departure, if possible.

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