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Reasons for migration and cultural distance in South African women's migratory adjustment experiences: A phenomenological account

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Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance in Migratory Adjustment: A Review of the Literature

Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance in South African Women’s Migratory Adjustment Experiences: A Phenomenological Account

Ida Steyn

A report submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science, Edith Cowan University

Submitted October 2009

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Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance in Migratory Adjustment:

A Review of the Literature

Ida Steyn
Abstract

Researchers have identified migration to a new country as a stressful life event that is associated with loss of family, friends and community, and adjustment difficulties in the new country (Markovizky & Samid, 2008). In addition, involuntary migration and adaption to a new cultural environment is known to be a factor of psychological distress. Much is unknown about the adjustment of involuntary migrants during the critical period of reestablishment in the new environment. Moreover, less is known about transition processes between similar cultural contexts. It might be that transition is not as well supported when there is cultural similarity between the migrant and the host country (Selmer, 2007). Further, the impact of migration on women in this context has received very little attention. This literature review will explore the experiences and impact of challenges during migration on women from South Africa to Western Australia. The experiences of these women are interesting for three reasons; the effect on women in this context has not been studied, transition is potentially involuntary, and transition to a similar culture rather than to a dissimilar culture. It is concluded that further research is needed to qualify theory in this area and this is required to improve services, information and support for involuntary migrant women into a culturally similar context; as well as add to literature on transition to culturally similar context and the impact of reasons for migration or transition.

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Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance in Migratory Adjustment: A Review of the Literature

Australia is a multicultural and cosmopolitan society where people from many countries around the world have made a new home (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs [DIMIA], 2002). This process of moving from one country to another permanently is described as migration (Stahl & Caligiuru, 2005). Migrants accounted for almost sixty percent of Australia’s population growth in 2008, when 443,195 overseas arrivals were added to the Australian population (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2009). This trend is set to continue and will play a major role in shaping the Australian society for many years to come. The Australian government considers migration as being essential to the country’s future economic growth and as a key to achieving a sustainable population (DIMIA, 2002). With the increasing prevalence of migration worldwide, there is a growing need to identify and understand the process of adjustment as migration to a new country is a stressful life event accompanied by psychological distress (Markovizky & Samid, 2008).

South Africa as a country of origin accounts for one of the largest migrant groups in Australia. In 2008, four percent of former South Africans were conferred Australian citizenship, and South Africa is among the top five source countries of migration to Australia (DIAC, 2009). 22,058 of the total number of South Africans living permanently in Australia are residents in Western Australia (DIAC, 2009). South Africa is among the top three countries of migration to the state of Western Australia, following the UK and New Zealand (DIAC, 2009). In 2008, six percent of South African born migrants contribute to Australia’s skill stream migration program which is specifically designed to target migrants who have skills and proven outstanding abilities that will contribute to the Australian economy (DIAC, 2009).
Migration is a world-wide phenomenon concerning one of the most radical life changes and transitions an individual can face (Tousignant, 1992). Hence, the study of migration has become of significant importance, largely in response to acculturation and gender. Therefore, this review of the literature will investigate acculturation considering the bi-dimensional model of Berry, Kim, Minde, and Mok (1987). During acculturation mental health problems often do arise, however these problems seem to depend on a variety of individual characteristics, for example gender (Carli, 1999). Whilst this review will investigate acculturation in the context of gender, the focus will be on women for they tend to adjust to the transition in a slower manner for various reasons, thus becoming vulnerable to higher levels of distress than men (Beiser & Hou, 2001). It is essential that women adjust in a positive manner as they play a significant role in supporting the immediate family (Remennick, 2005; Samarasinghe & Arvidsson, 2002).

Starting a new life in a new country and leaving behind that which is familiar, produces psychological distress that can have long-term effects (Hulewat, 1996). However, the process of migration is an extremely heterogeneous one; it may involve one individual or a family who moves to study, seek better employment, attempt to better their future, or to avoid political persecution (Bhugra, 2004). Further, Bhugra (2004) argued that not all migrants are likely to face similar experiences before and after migration; the effects and implications for the host country and for the migrants themselves depend upon the nature, scale and reasons for the migration. The purpose of this study will focus on the reasons for migration which significantly affect acculturation (Berry, Poortgina, Segall, & Dasen, 2002; Bhugra, 2004; Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Pernice, Trlin, Henderson, & North, 2000). This discussion will further extend to Kunz’s (1973) kinetic model of migration describing the key role of the difference between migrants and refugees.

An additional factor affecting acculturation is the cultural gap between country of origin and the host country (Baider, Ever-Hadani, & Denour, 1996; Selmer, 2007; Ward & Styles,
Many individuals migrate to countries with a similar culture because of the perception that familiarity of the host culture may result in higher levels of positive acculturation (William & Berry, 1991). However, recent research has found that it could be as difficult to adjust to a similar host culture as to an entirely different culture; the degree of cultural similarity may be irrelevant (O’Grady & Lane, 1996; Selmer, 2007). This literature review will investigate the complexity of cultural distance and the affect on acculturation. For example, a large number of migrants from the UK, New Zealand and South Africa choose Australia as the country of migration (DIAC, 2009) due to perceived cultural similarities. However, South African migrants are unique in this context as some indications reveal that they are perceived to be involuntary, unlike migrants from the UK and New Zealand who are voluntary (Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Pernice et al., 2000; Segel, 1995, Wagstyl, 2002). Involuntary migrants arrive in the new country with negative perceptions and lack of enthusiasm, which may cause psychological distress (Berry et al., 2002).

These two issues of ‘reasons for migration’ and ‘cultural distance’ seemingly affect the adjustment process of South African migrant women in Australia and are likely to cause stress and psychological distress. Hence, it is an issue worthy of investigation, more especially because of the profound effects it is likely to have on the economy, composition, culture and evolution of Australian society; and to ensure that migration programs support migrant groups to settle in the new society and integrate in a healthy manner, achieving their full potential as Australian residents/citizens as a result.

The final section of the review will address the conclusion with some possible recommendations for future research in the area of South African migrant women.
**Acculturation and Gender Differences**

Although the literature on migration is very broad, this review will focus on the reasons for migration and perceived cultural similarity. To illustrate these, the literature on acculturation in the context of gender differences is the first point of discussion.

Hofstede (1980) regards culture as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another. Culture determines the identity of a human group in the same way as personality determines the identity of an individual (Hofstede, 1980). While the term culture implies that only one culture is involved (Hofstede, 1980), acculturation refers to the dual process of cultural and psychological change (Berry, 2005). Acculturation occurs as a result of continuous first-hand contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005). At the group level, it involves changes in the social structure, economic base, and political organisation, while at the individual level; it involves changes in identity, values and attitudes (Berry et al., 2002). The concept of acculturation as an individual phenomenon (Berry et al., 1987) is coined psychological acculturation (Graves, 1967). Psychological acculturation refers to physical, biological, cultural, social, and behavioural changes (Berry et al., 1987) in an individual resulting from acculturation of their cultural group (Berry, 2005). During acculturation mental health problems often do arise; however, these problems seem to depend on a variety of group and individual characteristics and are not inevitable (Berry et al., 1987). Vast individual differences in psychological acculturation occur due to variable degrees of participation and varied goals (Berry, 2005). The uniqueness of this experience is strongly associated with gender, as research has shown that gender has an impact on the adaption and psychological distress experienced by migrants (Carli, 1990).

Gender shapes the roles and status that were originally occupied by adult migrants in their country of origin (Lamb & Bougher, 2009) and this continues to influence adjustment post migration (Tummala-Narra, 2004). Despite the variation in pre migration circumstances, women
are expected to be carriers of cultural traditions for their children in the new country (Tummala-
Narra, 2004) and women feel that they have to support the entire family (Remennick, 2005;
Samarasinghe & Arvidsson, 2002) by making the majority adjustments (Ward, 2003). Women
tend to adjust to the transition in a slower manner, thus becoming vulnerable to higher levels of
distress than men (Beiser & Hou, 2001). It has been suggested that this is frequent, for women
are likely to remain home based initially, and therefore experience isolation (Beiser & Hou,
2001). In addition, the usual friends and family support is not available, all of which impact on
the psychological well being of the individual (Beiser & Hou, 2001).

Several studies have investigated adjustment during migration with diverse affects which
are gender specific (Ataca & Berry, 2002; Remennick, 2005; Ward, 2003). In a 2003 study, Ward
(2003) explored the possible impact of the lack of supportive social network on migrant women
from the UK (n=154) living in Western Australia. Ward found that loss of comfort, social
support and security provided by their family back in the UK were strongly felt by mothers
resulting in distress and unhappiness. The results indicated that migrant women with children
missed the close support of family networks; and indicated that all migrant mothers, regardless of
origin, require a social support network to survive (Ward, 2003).

A further study by Remennick (2005) also confirmed that women manifested higher
adaptability than men in social integration. This study assessed different aspects of adjustment to
life in Israel among heterosexual couples (n=150) who had emigrated together from the former
Soviet Union. Findings supported Remennick’s hypothesis that women often manifested higher
adaptability than men in the social integrating process, despite their greater personal losses and
role overload. This study found that women had been ‘realists’ and had lowered their demands
and ambitions for the sake of expeditious adjustment and family wellbeing throughout the pre and
post migration process. Although the women had experienced occupational downgrading, lower
job security and under/unemployment, they had shown more flexibility and tolerance of their new
work roles. Remennick thus concluded that gender roles in migrant adjustment are subtly existent, and may vary between different countries of origin and ethnic groups. Importantly, research findings pertaining to a single migrant group cannot be generalized to other migrant groups (Remennick, 2005).

Similar to Ward (2003), Aroian, Norris, González de Chávez Fernández, and García Averasturi (2008) also recognised that women experienced psychological distress related to loss. Aroian et al. compared gender differences among Latin American migrants to Spain. Migrant men (n=150) and migrant women (n=150) completed questionnaires about demographic and migration characteristics, migration demands, and psychological distress. Women reported greater migration demands related to loss and occupation and more psychological distress than men. Thus, according to this study, women are at higher risk for psychological distress and sources of psychological distress are gender specific (Aroian et al., 2008). The finding regarding the importance of employment and occupation for women possibly arose due to the unique demographic and migration characteristics of the women in this sample. Almost 84.3% of the women in Aroian et al.'s study migrated without a spouse or partner, and are likely to be principal wage earners and therefore highly invested in finding secure full time employment.

Moreover, as a result of resettlement, migrant women may be less optimistic and suffer more often from mood disturbances than men, and are also more sensitive to social isolation and from disengagement (Aroian, Norris, & Chiang, 2003; Remennick, 2005). As mothers, migrant women face diverse challenges to fulfil their role as a mother and wife whilst still coping with the challenges and obstacles during migration (Ahmed, Stewart, Teng, Wahoush, & Gagnon, 2008; Remennick, 2005).

To examine this notion further, Ataca and Berry (2002) examined the acculturation and adaptation of married Turkish migrants living in Canada (n=200). Ataca and Berry found that Turkish females living in Canada had poorer sociocultural adjustment than males.
The study revealed the role of primary childcare falls more heavily on the mother in the context of migration, with fewer skills and less female adult support than in the country of origin. Hence, women experience the stress associated with raising children more than men (Ataca & Berry, 2002). Therefore, women were more isolated and had fewer opportunities to learn the new culture.

The above literature illustrates that migration experiences differ between the genders, and the nature of these differences may affect adjustment and acculturation. It is clear that women are more sensitive to isolation and are at higher risk of psychological distress. More research is required to understand how gender specific predictors of acculturation and psychological distress vary in migrant groups. Therefore, all factors that influence and shape adjustment to a new culture need to be considered.

**Acculturation Strategies**

Berry et al. (1987) suggests ineffective acculturation could destroy one's ability to carry on, whereas positive acculturation could offer enormous opportunities (Hulewat, 1996) that improve one's life chances and mental health. Generally, when acculturation experiences cause problems for acculturating individuals, the phenomenon of acculturative stress correlates with levels of adaption (Berry et al., 1987). Further, Berry et al. (1987, 2002) explain that the relationship between acculturation and stress depend upon a number of moderating factors, including gender but more broadly:

1. The nature of the larger society: the tolerance for cultural diversity (pluralist of multicultural ideology), or pressure to conform to a single cultural standard (assimilationist ideology).

2. The type of acculturating group: migrants, refugees, native peoples, ethnic groups and sojourners indicating the variations in the degree of voluntariness.
3. The mode of acculturation being experienced:

(i) when individuals do not maintain their own culture and completely absorb the new
culture (assimilation), (ii) when individuals wish to maintain their cultural heritage while
rejecting the new culture (separation), (iii) when the individual maintains the original
culture while also adopting the new culture (integration), (iv) when the individual rejects
both cultures (marginalisation).

4. The demographic, social and psychological characteristics (including coping abilities) of
the group and individual members; this includes education, age, gender, cognitive style,
and prior intercultural experiences.

The process of successful integration may be defined as an interaction between the host
society and migrant group that precipitates a change in cultural amalgam without individual loss
of cultural identity (London, 1976). Whilst social integration (Jacoby, 1962) emphasises the
importance of mutual contact and adjustment between cultural groups in order to avoid loss of
cultural identity by individual members of their group (Berry, 1990), assimilation is more of a
unilateral process, whereby the migrant group is expected to change their identity, minimising
differences between the host community and migrant group (Sommerlad & Berry, 1970). Gordon
(1964) defined structural assimilation as a migrant’s ability to assimilate into social and
occupational structures of the host society and believed that once structural assimilation occurred
all other sub-processes would automatically follow.

The most frequently used model of acculturation is Berry et al. (1987) bi-dimensional
model. Berry et al. (1987) have proposed this influential model on two independent dimensions
in which migrants’ acculturation attitudes are identified in terms of their orientations to two basic
issues. Depending on whether the migrant considers it to be of value to (1) maintain or reject his
or her cultural identity and characteristics, or (2) maintain or reject relationships with other groups
in the host society, the migrant adopts one of the four mentioned acculturation strategies/attitudes:
integration, assimilation, separation (or segregation), and marginalisation. Integration can only be ‘freely’ and successfully pursued by the migrant when the dominant group is open and inclusive in its orientation towards their cultural diversity (Berry, 2008). Therefore, mutual ‘accommodation’ is required to attain integration and to meet the needs of all groups living together in a pluralist society, making cultural diversity a feature of the society as a whole, this is termed ‘multiculturalism’ (Berry, 2008).

Consistent with Berry et al.’s. (1987) framework, research has revealed that integration and assimilation in particular are the most preferred strategies (Van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998) of the majority of migrants (Schmitz, 1992). However, findings from previous research indicate that respondents who assimilate, experience more depression than respondents who integrate (Berry, 1997; Schmitz, 1992). In addition, both Garza-Guerrero (1974) and Pollock (1989) have advised that migrants should not disassociate themselves from their heritage for they would miss out on vital aspects of themselves (Spitzform, 2000).

Montreuil and Bourhis (2001) suggested host community acculturation orientations toward ‘valued’ migrants, that is, groups that appear to be culturally and linguistically similar to the dominant group, would be more favourable than acculturation orientations toward ‘devalued’ immigrant groups, or those considered to have less cultural similarities to the dominant group (Pointkowski, Florak, Hoelker, & Obdrzakel, 2000). Contrary to research findings that migrants may be classified into either ‘valued’ or ‘devalued’ target groups, is the suggestion that all migrants experience virtually the same acculturation orientations due to their general classification as ‘newcomers’ by members of the host community (Ostrom & Sedidikes, 1992).

In a review of the literature on ‘expatriates’ and their acculturation, Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991) pointed out the importance of acculturation gained through effective interactions and socialization with host country nationals, but to keep in mind that the cultures of
some countries seem to be more difficult to adapt to because of greater cultural barriers where the gap between the home and host culture is larger.

Further empirical research is necessary to determine which acculturation style under certain socio-cultural circumstances will be the most effective one to contribute to the psychophysical well being of an migrant (Schmitz, 1992). In order to manage the understanding of acculturation more effectively, it is important to study the reason for migration (e.g., being a refugee or migrant) (Pernice & Brook, 1994). For this interaction the writer refers to an earlier model described as the “kinetic model” of Kunz (1973, p. 131).

Factors Affecting Acculturation

Reasons for Migration

In his kinetic model of migration, Kunz (1973) describes the key role of the difference between migrants and refugees with the former described as being “pulled” out of their country and the latter as being “pushed” out of their country of origin (p. 131). This theory is similar to Berry et al’s. (1987) acculturation theory as outlined above. Kunz described voluntary migrants as being ‘pulled away’ from their homelands, and that they respond to pull forces resembling opportunities such as better living standards, enhanced job opportunities and education with the option of returning to their homeland. Whereas, refugees are described as being ‘pushed out’ of their home country, therefore the reasons for migration are ‘expulsion forces.’ Further, Kunz identifies two subtypes of refugees being forced out of their country under slightly different circumstances. Both types of refugees are acknowledged as being reluctant migrants:

1. The “anticipatory refugee” is one who leaves the home country before the political situation prevents an orderly departure (Kunz, 1973, p. 131). Further, loss of liberty and danger to life could become more important than economic restrictions as changes in the country of origin occur (Khawaja & Mason, 2008). As such, the individual is ‘pushed’ out of the country of origin rather than ‘pulled’ by the pleasant appearance of the new
country. The anticipatory refugee arrives prepared in the country of choice; is financially sustainable, familiar with the language, and informed about the work force. These individuals plan and prepare their departure in advance, although pressured. Kunz indicates that it is easy to mistake the anticipatory refugee for a voluntary migrant in search of better opportunities.

2. The “acute refugee” contrasts with the anticipatory refugee in that individuals tend to flee in masses or in individual groups to gain refugee status where safety is the primary purpose; thus, the emphasis is escape from political violence and persecution (Kunz, 1973, p. 132).

Despite the fact that Kunz’s (1973) kinetic model of migration is relatively old, it is still suitable as more recent research has continued to be conducted based on this theory (Bloch, 2000; Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Pernice & Brook, 1994; Pernice et al., 2000), indicating the continued relevance of this model. Pollock (1989) suggested whatever the reason for leaving the homeland, internal and external ties to past reality still remain within all migrants. Nevertheless, it is important to determine categories of migration when trying to understand the impact of it (Bhugra, 2004) as Murphy (1977) proposed that mental health is influenced by migrant status. This is applicable when migration has been forced as in the case of refugees, as well as when it has occurred freely as in the case of voluntary migrants.

Voluntary migrants willingly leave their country of origin (Gebre, 2002), and have the choice of returning to their home country (Pernice et al., 2000). Research indicates that immigrants who choose to migrate for the opportunity of personal and economic improvement (Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Lassetter & Callister, 2008), with a desire to stay permanently, may have a more favourable attitude towards contact with the dominant culture and experience better mental health than those who were forced to move (Berry et al., 1987). Voluntary migration may occur to fulfil a dream of growth, prosperity, and a better future, but also for family reunification.
where one person of the family is likely the primary initiator of the migration for the family group and relatives may be less willing companions (Salant & Lauderdale, 2003). Nevertheless, Lasseter and Callister (2008) argued that both good and poor mental health can be present among voluntary migrants in Western countries, and that migration should be considered as an extended event which could be a challenging process with detrimental impacts occurring years after the actual physical relocation.

However, refugees move involuntarily (Birman & Tran, 2008; Gebre, 2002) due to the fear of persecution causing them to feel uprooted and pushed out of their home country (Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Krishnan & Berry, 1992). Consequently they may experience the relocation as a threat or burden (Khawaja & Mason, 2008). Moreover, research indicates that if the migration is considered to be involuntary, arriving in the new country with negative perceptions and lack of enthusiasm, causes exacerbation of psychological distress (Berry et al., 2002). Numerous studies have documented the negative impact of traumatic history on the psychological adjustment of refugees (Ehntholt & Yule, 2006), and this negative impact of forced displacement is often deep rooted, far-reaching, and enduring (Gebre, 2002). Furthermore, Roth and Ekblad (1993) argued that manifestations of psychopathology, such as depressive syndromes, somatisation, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and paranoid syndromes have been found across refugee groups. Nevertheless, there is a belief that traumatic experiences have such a strong impact on adjustment, however only a few studies of traumatised refugees have included a comprehensive assessment of acculturation (Birman & Tran, 2008; Nicholson, 1997).

In a study exploring the affects of involuntary migration, a qualitative study by Samarasinghe and Arvidsson (2002) on refugee families (n=10) from Kurdistan and Africa who were based in Sweden, found that involuntariness of migration does make an impact on the mental health of refugees. In a similar study by Samarasinghe, Fridlund, and Arvidsson (2006), Primary Health Care Nurses (n=34) from Sweden were interviewed to describe the perceived
health of these involuntary migrant families in transition. It was found that the transition was a stressful experience for them, while socio-environmental stressors such as having unprocessed trauma, change of family roles, attitudes of host country and social segregation within society were detrimental to the well-being of the family.

Similarly, in a recent study by Birnam and Tran (2008), the effect of pre and post migration factors on psychological adjustment for a community sample of Vietnamese refugees resettled in the United States was examined. A substantial proportion of ex-political detainees who experienced a particularly large number of traumatic events prior to their migration were sampled, and their psychological adjustment (life satisfaction) and distress (depression, anxiety, and alienation) were assessed (Birnam & Tran, 2008). It was found that traumatic events prior to migration only predicted measures of anxiety. However, pre-migration trauma was not a significant predictor of depression and alienation in this study. It is important to mention that the sample in this study had lived in the United States for 11 years on average, and according to Beiser (2006) it could be possible that the effects of pre-migration trauma diminish over time in resettlement.

In fact, to examine this notion further, Nicholson (1997) investigated the mental health status of a nonclinical sample of Southeast Asian refugees (n=447) in the United States. The sampling design of Nicholson’s study controlled for age and length of residence in the United States and was conducted through two-hour personal interviews. Many Southeast Asian refugees showed psychiatric problems stemming from stressors that occurred from both pre (traumatic events experienced), and post migration (current stressors and perceived health status) factors. Nicholson reported that 40% of study participants had clinical depression, 35% had clinical anxiety, and 14% had PTSD. Current stress, which measured the degree of stress created by acculturative tasks such as learning the language,
seeking employment, rebuilding social supports, and redefining roles, was the strongest overall predictor of mental health.

In a later study, Gebre (2002) hypothesised that “voluntary settlers” (i.e., migrants) would adapt better and sooner than “involuntary settlers,” (i.e., refugees) if the settlers were involved in the same resettlement program (p. 31). Gebre studied the existence and causes of the relative reestablishment differences between the voluntary and involuntary Ethiopian settlers in Metekel. This study revealed that certain psychological and socio-economic factors caused relative adjustment differences between these two categories of settlers. The voluntary settlers exhibited determination to stay in the resettlement area and launched a long-term life plan, whereas the involuntary settlers developed a heightened sense of insecurity and experienced a lack of determination to live in Metekel showing a sustained ambition to return back to their home country. The results of Gebre’s study provided support for the hypothesis that the voluntary settlers appeared to establish themselves better than the involuntary settlers. Moreover, Gebre suggested that the success of reestablishment in the new environment could be determined by the manner of resettlement. This finding strongly indicates that voluntary migrants demonstrate higher motivation prior to migration.

Pernice and Brook (1994) also investigated and compared mental health levels of one refugee group (129 Indochinese), and two migrant groups (57 Pacific Islanders and 63 British) living in New Zealand. The hypothesis that migrant status (being a refugee or migrant) affects mental health and that refugees experience more emotional distress than migrants was not supported by this study. However, Indochinese refugees experienced significantly more anxiety and depression than British migrants, while the differences were minor among migrants from the Pacific Islands (Pernice & Brook, 1994). Pernice and Brook argued that the Pacific Islanders’ mental health was similar to that of the refugees, since they have become New Zealand’s least favoured ethnic group. Therefore, distinct adaptation differences were found between Pacific
Islanders and British migrants. British migrants were found to adapt more easily to stressors; thus, the hypothesis was only supported by the comparison with British migrants. This study highlighted that in addition to migrant status as a predictor of adaptation, cultural and ethnic differences of voluntary migrants contribute to the ease of adaptation.

This review of the research literature shows a significant difference between voluntary and involuntary migration, and that refugees can experience more distress, anxiety and depression than voluntary migrants. Furthermore, the concept of involuntary migration is extended beyond the ‘refugee’ group to incorporate migrants who have been pushed and those who have fled for reasons of safety and increased opportunity. The acute refugee is intimidated or forced to leave the home country, whereas the anticipatory refugee is one who leaves the home country before the political situation prevents an orderly departure. It is possible that involuntary migrants or those who have been pushed out of their home country could be mistaken for voluntary migrants (Khawaja & Mason, 2008), potentially depriving involuntary migrants from support which could be essential to reducing mental health problems (Stratton, 2000).

Therefore, building from available literature, the writer would argue that further research should emphasise expanding the conceptions of anticipatory refugees and the impact that this type of involuntary migration has on the health of individuals and families. In addition to reasons for migration affecting adjustment in the host country, the capacity of migrants to acculturate also influences their abilities to adjust. An important determinant in acculturation has been shown to be cultural distance.

**Cultural Distance**

Cultural distance refers to how similar or dissimilar a person perceives the host culture to be compared to their own culture (Selmer, 2007). Ward and Styles (2007) stipulated that cultural distance has an effect on the migrant’s resettlement experience. Previous research on migration focused on the large differences between host cultures (Hulewat, 1996; Lassetter & Callister,
2008), and has focussed less on migration into a country with a similar cultural context (Selmer, 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009). Theory and research typically suggest that the more different the host culture is from the immigrant’s own, such as speaking a different language, the more difficult the adjustment process will be, consequently impacting on psychological outcomes such as depression and anxiety (O’Grady & Lane, 1996; Selmer, 2007). Furthermore, prior research by Williams and Berry (1991) has found that the better the knowledge of the host culture’s language, the higher the level of positive acculturation.

However, recent research has produced contrary findings arguing that it could be as difficult to adjust to a similar host culture as to a very different culture; the degree of cultural similarity/dissimilarity may be irrelevant (O’Grady & Lane, 1996; Selmer, 2007). Limited research on these contrary findings has been conducted with the majority of this research performed on expatriates during international assignments; often where cultural distance is slight and focussed on bridging managerial gaps, and this context of cultural difference might not generally apply.

For example, an exploratory study was conducted by Selmer (2007) assessing socio-cultural adjustment and cultural distance of American business expatriates. Canada was selected as a culturally similar host location while Germany represented a culturally dissimilar culture. Although American business expatriates perceived Germany to be more culturally different to their own culture than perceptions of Canada, no significant differences were evident between the two groups in regards to general socio-cultural adjustment. The significant overall effect suggested that expatriates abroad could expect similar adjustment difficulties, regardless of the degree of cultural similarity of the host location. Selmer argued that the degree of cultural distance perceived may not be a key factor in how easy it is for a person to adjust.

In another exploratory study conducted by O’Grady and Lane (1996), further support for this claim was found. O’Grady and Lane discovered that only 7 of the 32 Canadian retail
companies were functioning successfully in the US. The Canadian executives made the assumption that the Americans and Canadians shared a similar language, culture, values and business practices. However, the “cultural distance paradox” (familiarity may breed carelessness) appeared; anticipations of similar and familiar culture in the host country, were found to be different than expected (O’Grady & Lane, 1996, p. 310). These assumptions of ‘similarity’ prevented executives from learning about fundamental differences (O’Grady & Lane, 1996).

Other research in this area suggested that non-English speaking background (NESB) countries and English speaking background (ESB) host countries are culturally different, and therefore the NESB migrants will experience adjustments problems (Ward & Styles, 2003). Since ESB migrants are language proficient, it is expected that they will assimilate with the ESB host country without difficulty (Stratton, 2000), while migrants who have little English vocabulary on arrival are at an immediate disadvantage (Bhugra, 2004). Furthermore, Bhugra (2004) argues that knowledge of language will help individuals acculturate. According to Stratton (2000), NESB migrants are treated as foreigners and are expected to have difficulty settling. Ward (2003) argues however, that Australia is known to be a culturally diverse country and many British migrants (ESB migrants) may feel that they live in a country with a different culture, language and geography. Thus, migrants from the UK (ESB migrants) should be identified as ‘foreigners’ and should not be seen as the ‘invisible migrants,’ considering they may also experience difficulties in settling and adjusting to a new country (Ward, 2003).

Related results have also been reported from a study conducted by Ward and Styles (2007) observing the impact of migration on British women currently living in Western Australia. Findings indicated that these migrants maintained a strong emotional bond to their homeland. Britain and Australia are in the same Anglo cluster, therefore it is reasonable to assume that there is a substantial degree of cultural similarity between the two countries. However, findings
suggested that migrants from an ESB who have relocated to an ESB country can still experience great difficulty with the acculturation experienced (Ward & Styles, 2007).

Furthermore, many studies have supported the theory that a dissimilar culture provokes adjustment difficulty. For example, in a study investigating host country identification of members of immigrant groups, Nesdale and Mak (2000) included migrants from Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Sri Lanka and New Zealand, to examine cultural similarity to the host country, Australia. The results demonstrated that New Zealanders who considered themselves to be culturally more similar to the Australians, experienced higher levels of acceptance by Australians, lower ethnic group involvement, and had more friends compared with the groups that considered themselves to be culturally more dissimilar from the host group.

Additionally, Redmond and Bunyi (1993) examined the relationship between social integration and perceived cultural distance of international students in an American university. It was found that British, European, and South American students were more integrated than North Korean, Taiwanese, and Southeast Asian students, presumably because of the larger perceived cultural distance of the latter groups.

Similarly, in a more recent study, Zlobina, Basabe, Paez and Furnham (2006) examined the sociocultural dimension of acculturation of Brazilians, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and North and Sub-Saharan Africans in Spain. One of the factors significantly associated with social difficulty in the host society, was cultural distance. It was found that lower perceived cultural distance between the host country and the immigrants resulted in achievement of cultural-relevant knowledge and skills. Further, Zlobina et al. argued, when cultural distance is perceived as very similar between two countries, it might be hypothesised that the individual feels motivated and able to learn more about the new culture. In contrast, when intercultural misunderstandings and faults are frequently experienced, the perception of the impossibility of dealing with the new environment could arise, with the consequences of low self-esteem and self-efficiency (Zlobina et
This finding indicates significantly that levels of acculturation rely on the distance between the two cultures.

In summary, studies have shown that migrants from entirely different cultures to the host culture are aware of the dissimilarity, while those from cultures similar to the host culture often fail to identify any differences that do exist, as they are not expected. This could possibly reinforce their frustration and further obstruct their adjustment (O’Grady & Lane, 1996). On the other hand, research has proposed more generally that the more different the host culture is from the migrant’s own, the more difficult the adjustment process will be (O’Grady & Lane, 1996; Selmer, 2007). Either way, cultural distances exert an important and ongoing impact on migrants and are an essential factor in regards to the effectiveness of any acculturation. Further research is needed as to whether the degree of cultural similarity/dissimilarity interacts with the migrant’s ability to acculturate.

It is in this context that the review will now discuss South African migrants. South African migrants leave their country involuntarily to some extent, and could be seen as anticipatory refugees. It is this involuntary context which is therefore interesting for further study. Furthermore, cultural distance between South Africa and Australia is also interesting; there might be an expectation that these migrants should non problematically ‘fit in’ with the Australian population, and as a result could become ‘invisible migrants’ often ignored and un-researched (Stratton, 2000).

South African Migrants

Although the South African government does not keep reliable migration statistics, a number of recent independent studies show that mass departure from South Africa is ongoing (Johnson, 2009). South Africans have migrated to several Western countries for various reasons (Khawaja & Mason, 2008). Violent attacks, crime, political instability, and ‘affirmative action’ (i.e., job insecurity) which limit the opportunities for advancement are all reasons why South
Africans are leaving their country (Bennett & Rigby, 1997; Johnson, 2009). In this context, the term 'affirmative action' refers to a policy promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination (Alexander, 2007) and assists those who in the past have been systematically oppressed and denied opportunities (Reddy & Choudree, 1996). Additional reasons to move were considered to be corruption, and declining standards in healthcare and education (Wagstyl, 2002). Future fact polling indicates that more than 95 percent of South Africans who are eager to leave their country, cited fear of criminal violence as the most important factor affecting their thoughts (Johnson, 2009). Johnson (2009) stated that South Africa has one of the highest rape and murder rates in the world per capita, with more than 50 killings a day. Furthermore, Khawaja and Mason (2008) have argued that the experience of crime in South Africa also contributes to the psychological distress experienced by these migrants.

Pernice et al. (2000) investigated the mental health of British (n=36), Indian (n=36), Chinese (n=36) and South African (n=35) migrants to New Zealand. It was anticipated for the British and South African mental health levels to be better than those of the Indian and Chinese because of the expected greater cultural difference experienced by the Chinese and Indians. However, regardless of the cultural similarity (i.e., familiar language, sporting interests, food types); the mental health levels of South African migrants were different from British migrants, and were similar to that experienced by the migrants from India and China. Indeed Pernice et al. concluded that the psychological distress might have been a result of South Africans having different motivational factors for migration. A possible explanation for these unexpected results may be drawn from Kunz’s (1973) ‘push and pull’ theory. The majority of South Africans in this study clearly reported push factors for leaving their country with reasons such as violence, crime, and political instability.

Furthermore, Khawaja and Mason (2008) investigated the psychological distress experienced by South African migrants (n=101) who had left their home country and who have
been living in Australia for less than five years. Factors predicting distress and the way it was manifested were examined by Khawaja and Mason. In general, the South African migrants appeared to cope adequately and manifested low levels of distress. Psychological distress was not affected by employment status or gender. However, psychological distress reduced significantly as the length of stay increased. There were indications that these migrants perceived themselves as being ‘pushed’ out of South Africa as a result of their experience of violence, low self-esteem, and grief over leaving South Africa which aggravated the reported feelings of distress. Results of this study suggested that the South African migrant is a reluctant migrant and can be described as an “anticipatory refugee” according to Kunz’s (1973, p. 131) theory. Khawaja and Mason argued that these migrants could therefore experience more complex psychological disorders as a consequence.

Segel (1995) investigated acculturative stress among South African migrants residing in the United States. The results indicated that South African migrants living in the United States did not experience excessive difficulty, and formed positive relations with those from the American culture, while the majority (93%) also maintained their identity with the South African culture. The results showed that those migrants who were integrated reported lower levels of anxiety than those migrants who were assimilated. In the same study, Segel hypothesised that female migrants from South Africa would report higher levels of anxiety and depression than the male migrants. The hypothesis that females would experience higher levels of depression was supported. Prior to migrating, the majority of Caucasian South African households employed full-time domestic employees to whom the females could delegate tasks, leaving the female South African with limited experience in household chores (Segel, 1995). Segel stated that after arriving in the United States, these South African females’ daily routine was significantly different to their past experience without the social support system and domestic help which they were used to. Also, South African female migrants would most certainly stay at home to
participate in household chores and child rearing, which could result in less contact with Americans generally and therefore could feel isolated and lonely which results in depression rather than anxiety (Segel, 1995). This feeling of depression interfered with the performance of everyday tasks (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999). The hypothesis that female respondents would experience higher levels of anxiety than male respondents was not supported. The latter finding could be explained by the overall high level of income which enabled the luxury of easier lifestyles compared to migrant females from other cultures, thus experienced less anxiety (Segel, 1995). Furthermore, the majority of the South African respondents in Segel’s study spoke English when living in South Africa and did not have the added stressor of learning the English language, predominantly used in America. Interestingly, large numbers of Afrikaans speaking Caucasian South Africans migrate to Australia which might theoretically link to the research cited above, suggesting therefore that this sub group might experience greater difficulty acculturating to Australian society, than English speaking South Africans.

South Africa was a member of the British Commonwealth until 1961; therefore the South African culture is in many ways very similar to that of the British culture (Pernice & Brook, 1994; Pernice et al., 2000; Segel, 1995) and its former colonies. As a result of the British influence on South African culture, South Africans may assume that relocating to Australia where the language, norms and culture are similar to their own, may be less stressful and will likely facilitate easier acculturation. Wagstyl (2002) argued that favoured destinations for South African migrants are Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA, and the United Kingdom. South African migrants perceive these countries as offering the type of lifestyle, values and culture into which they can readily integrate (Bennett & Rigby, 1997). Furthermore, this perceived similarity of values between the two countries is supported by the cross-cultural research findings of Hofstede (1980). It is very likely that when South Africans migrate to any of these countries, they
will be able to selectively absorb many aspects of these cultures while rejecting those that they do not find positive (Segel, 1995).

Limited research has been conducted on South African migrants in general, particularly in Australia, therefore the experiences of resettlement of this particular migrant group and the impact of acculturation remains unclear (Khawaja & Mason, 2008). Furthermore, in view of the fact that South Africans are migrating to Australia at increasing rates, understanding the reason for their migration and the influence of cultural distance will provide invaluable information for government agencies and those working in this area to support the transition of these migrants. Moreover, it is anticipated that this knowledge may be beneficial to the development of support services which can aid South African migrants in their migration journey.

Conclusions

This literature review has demonstrated the complex relationship between acculturation and the impact on cultural displacement. There are many gaps in the research on South African migrant women and limited research addressing South African migrant women’s adjustment to a similar cultural context such as Australia. Nevertheless, the literature suggested that migrant women in general are predominantly sensitive to the loss of comfort, social support and security that may result in psychological distress post-migration. Women are more isolated than their male partners and have fewer opportunities to integrate due to involvement of child rearing duties. It is important to take into account that women from diverse migrant groups may experience migration differently for many reasons, such as reasons for migration and cultural similarity.

It is important to correctly identify the reasons for migration to better understand the impact of migration on the individual, as mental health is influenced by migrant status. This review of literature has shown that the concept of involuntary migration includes groups other than refugees. For example, the “acute refugee” is intimidated or forced to leave the home country, whereas the “anticipatory refugee” is one who leaves the home country before the
Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance

The political situation prevents an orderly departure and arrives prepared in the country of choice (Kunz, 1973, p.131). The literature suggested evidence that some South African migrants for example are considered to be involuntary migrants, and classified as anticipatory refugees (Kunz, 1973) who are in search of safety and better opportunities. Although pressured, these individuals unlike refugees plan and prepare their departure in advance. Hence, this group of involuntary migrants could easily be mistaken for voluntary migrants (Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Kunz, 1973), potentially depriving them of support which could be essential to reduce mental health problems (Stratton, 2000). This is important as research indicates that negative perceptions and lack of enthusiasm during involuntary migration exacerbate distress.

Furthermore, cultural distance has an important impact on migrants and is an essential factor in regards to the effectiveness of the migrant’s acculturation during the resettlement experience. Literature suggested that previous research on migration focused on the substantial differences between host cultures, demonstrating the more different the host culture is from the migrant’s own, the more difficult the adjustment process will be. More recently, limited research on expatriates has found that it could be as difficult to adjust to a similar host culture as to a very different culture and that the degree of cultural similarity may be irrelevant; those migrating to a country with a similar culture to their own often fail to identify existing differences, resulting in frustration and prolonging their adjustment process. The cultural distance between South Africa and Australia is perceived to be close and there may be an expectation among these migrants to easily ‘fit in’ to the Australian culture, but this could well result in this group becoming the ‘invisible migrants’, often ignored and un-researched.

In this context, research into adjustment experiences of South African migrant women, especially from a phenomenological perspective could yield rich description of their lives during resettlement in the new country. The findings will add to qualification of theory and can further
be used by support services, including migration agencies, the Australian government, Australian mental health professionals and counselling services.
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Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance in South African Women’s Migratory Adjustment Experiences:
A Phenomenological Account
Ida Steyn
Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance in South African Women’s Migratory Adjustment Experiences: A Phenomenological Account

Abstract

This study used a phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1999) to explore the experiences of South African migrant women residing in Western Australia. Qualitative data, from a sample of 13 women, was obtained, using semi-structured, individual interviews. Thematic content analysis revealed common themes in the women’s experiences; focused on how reasons for migration and cultural similarity influenced their experiences. The women were categorised as anticipatory refugees. Although being pushed out of their country as a result of violence and crime, they arrived prepared in Australia, their country of choice due to the perceived cultural similarities. Concerns for extended families left behind in an unsafe South Africa resulted in feelings of guilt, grief and loneliness, causing distress. Supporting immediate family settling into the new country without domestic support they were accustomed to, prolonged the adjustment process. Cultural similarity between South Africa and Australia was related to expectations of unproblematic adjustment. The majority of the women integrated positively in a period of four to six years; possibly a result of the cultural similarity experienced. Those who experienced discrepancies between their expectations and the realities of Australian culture resulted in adjustment difficulties. Further research is recommended to explore South African women’s migratory adjustment with respect to future research and support services for migrating under involuntary circumstances into a culturally similar context.

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Supervisor: Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle

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Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance in South African Women’s 
Migratory Adjustment Experiences: 
A Phenomenological Account 

Australia is a multicultural and cosmopolitan society where people from many 
countries around the world have made a new home (Department of Immigration and 
Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs [DIMIA], 2002). This process of moving from one 
country to another permanently is described as migration (Stahl & Caligiuru, 2005). 
Migrants accounted for almost sixty percent of Australia’s population growth in 2008, when 
443,195 overseas arrivals were added to the Australian population (Department of 
Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2009). This trend is set to continue and will play a 
major role in shaping the Australian society for many years to come. The Australian 
government considers migration as being essential to the country’s future economic growth 
and as a key to achieving a sustainable population (DIMIA, 2002). 

With the increasing prevalence of migration worldwide, there is a growing need to 
identify and understand the process of adjustment as migration to a new country is a stressful 
life event accompanied by psychological distress (Markovizky & Samid, 2008). 

South Africa as a country of origin accounts for one of the largest migrant groups in 
Australia. In 2008, four percent of former South Africans were conferred Australian 
citizenship, and South Africa is among the top five source countries of migration to Australia 
(DIAC, 2009). 22,058 of the total number of South Africans living permanently in Australia 
are resident in Western Australia (DIAC, 2009). South Africa is among the top three 
countries of migration to the state of Western Australia, following the UK and New Zealand 
(DIAC, 2009). In 2008, six percent of South African born migrants contribute to Australia’s 
skill stream migration program which is specifically designed to target migrants who have
skills and proven outstanding abilities that will contribute to the Australian economy (DIAC, 2009).

The previous South African government had policies in place which supported 'apartheid', which means 'separateness.' The system of 'apartheid' was established to ensure white supremacy through discriminatory laws (Marger, 1991), and to maintain separation among the different ethnicities (Segel, 1995). In 1994 when Nelson Mandela, the first black South African president was elected, he systematically dismantled racial discrimination laws putting an end to a long bleak chapter in the history of South Africa (Moller, 2007). As black South Africans were disadvantaged during apartheid, ‘affirmative action’ was introduced. In this context, the term ‘affirmative action’ refers to a policy to promote equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination (Alexander, 2007) and assists those who in the past have been systematically oppressed and denied opportunities (Reddy & Choudree, 1996). The end of ‘apartheid’ and the prolonged difficult transition to the new South Africa has given rise to unmet community expectations and high levels of uncertainty which appeared to have transformed into a state of increased crime and violence (Comas-Díaz & Jacobsen, 1996). South Africa has one of the highest rape and murder rates in the world per capita, with more than 50 killings a day (Johnson, 2009). As a consequence, South Africans are leaving their country due to these violent attacks, crime, political instability, and affirmative action which limit their opportunities (Bennett & Rigby, 1997; Johnson, 2009). Other reasons for migration are corruption, declining standards in healthcare and education (Wagstyl, 2002).

Gender is a complex issue in the context of migration and is a demographic factor that has an impact on the adaption and psychological distress experience by migrants (Carli, 1990). Despite the variation in pre migration circumstances, women are expected to be carriers of cultural traditions for their children in the new country, and these women feel that they have to support the entire family
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(Remennick, 2005; Samarasinghe & Arvidsson, 2002) making the majority of adjustments (Ward, 2003). The formation of role identity is closely linked with changing cultural identification in the lives of migrant women (Tummala-Narra, 2004). When a family moves, it is often the women who make the major adjustments as the established social support framework such as family, friends, and community, will not be available in the new place (Samarasinghe & Arvidsson, 2002; Ward, 2003). Thus, being geographically and emotionally isolated from the closeness of family and community, may increase the likelihood that problems will manifest (Ward, 2003). Post migration, men are primarily responsible for the economic support of their families, whereas women are responsible for childcare, housework and emotional nurturance (Lamb & Bougher, 2009). For these reasons, women frequently suffer from social and professional isolation that may cause distress (Ward, 2003). Furthermore, self-neglect may occur, as women see themselves as caregivers to men and children, and not to themselves (Remennick, 2005). It is essential to understand how gender specific predictors of acculturation and psychological distress vary in different migrant groups. Prior to migration, the majority of Caucasian South African households had full-time domestic employees, leaving the South African women with limited experience in household chores (Segel, 1995). Without domestic support in Australia and facing challenges during migration, this may possibly result in isolation and loneliness to an extreme unlike that experienced by migrants who never had the luxury of domestic support. Furthermore, it is important to explore South African women’s adjustment experiences to improve our understanding of this migrant group, which could be beneficial to both the Australian mental health professionals and their South African clients.

In an attempt to explore this complex issue of women, it is necessary to understand that experiences of migration are extremely diverse. These experiences can be influenced by factors such as one individual or a family who move to study, seek better employment, attempt to better their future, or to avoid political persecution (Bhugra, 2004). Not all women are likely to face similar experiences before and after migration; the effects and implications for migrants depend
upon the nature, scale, reasons for the migration (Bhugra, 2004) and cultural distance (Selmer, 2007; Ward & Styles, 2007). As outlined above, reasons for South African migrants leaving their home country are predominantly the presence of violence, crime, political instability and affirmative action. Therefore, previous research suggested that South Africans may be classified as reluctant migrants (Bennett & Rigby, 1997; Johnson, 2009; Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Moller, 2007; Pernice, Trlin, Henderson, & North, 2000; Wagstyl, 2002) and could be further categorised as “anticipatory refugees” according to Kunz’s (1973, p. 131) theory. Kunz identifies the ‘anticipatory refugee’ as one who leaves the home country before the political situation prevents an orderly departure. The anticipatory refugee arrives prepared in the country of choice, usually having sustainable funds, knowing the language, and being informed about the work force. Although pressured, these individuals plan and prepare their departure in advance. Furthermore, it is easy to mistake the anticipatory refugee for a voluntary migrant in search of better opportunities (Kunz, 1973). Involuntary migrants arrive in the new country with negative perceptions and lack of enthusiasm which exacerbate psychological distress (Berry, Poortgina, Seagul, & Dasen, 2002). Hence, South African migrant women may experience more complex mental health problems as a consequence of being involuntary (Bennett & Rigby, 1997; Johnson, 2009; Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Moller, 2007; Pernice et al., 2000; Wagstyl, 2002). However, it has been argued that South Africans are generally assumed to be voluntary migrants (Khawaja & Mason, 2008) confirming Kunz’s (1973) above mentioned statement, which may potentially deprive these migrants from essential support that may reduce mental health problems (Stratton, 2000). Therefore, a greater understanding of South African migrant women is necessary by exploring the reasons behind their migration and the possible impact these reasons may have on their acculturation and adjustment experiences. This understanding has the potential to provide invaluable information for therapists and those working in this area to support transition of these migrants. Furthermore, it is anticipated that this knowledge may be beneficial to the development
of support services which can aid South African migrant women in their migration journey. In addition, understanding these women residing in Australia is vital because of the profound effects it has on the economic, composition, culture and evolution of the Australian society (DIAC, 2009).

In addition, the cultural gap between the home and host country (cultural distance) also has a significant affect on the migrant’s resettlement experience (Selmer, 2007; Ward & Styles, 2007). Previous research on migration focused on the large differences between host cultures (Hulewat, 1996; Lassetter & Callister, 2008), and has focussed less on migration into a country with a similar cultural context (Selmer, 2007; Selmer & Lauring, 2009), such as South Africans migrating to Australia. Theory and research typically suggest that the more different the host culture is from the migrant’s own, the more difficult the adjustment process will be, consequently impacting on psychological outcomes such as depression and anxiety (O’Grady & Lane, 1996; Selmer, 2007). Whilst limited research has been conducted on adjustment to a similar host culture, recent research has produced findings arguing that it could be as difficult to adjust to a similar host culture as to a very different culture; the degree of cultural similarity/dissimilarity may be irrelevant (O’Grady & Lane, 1996; Selmer, 2007). Furthermore, studies have shown that migrants from entirely different host cultures are aware of the divergence, while those in cultures similar to their own often fail to identify existing differences, reinforcing frustration and may possibly obstruct adjustment (O’Grady & Lane, 1996).

Prior to 1961, South Africa was a member of the British Commonwealth; therefore the South African culture is very similar to that of the British culture (Pernice & Brook, 1994; Pernice et al., 2000; Segel, 1995) and its former colonies. One of the favoured destinations of South African migrants is Australia. As a result of British influences on their culture, South Africans may assume that relocating to Australia may have the effect of unproblematic integration and uncomplicated adjustment, for Australia may offer a familiar type of lifestyle. Hence, this
migrant cohort may anticipate no complications pre-migration, thus, be unprepared for possible obstacles. In addition, the host country may expect South African migrants to ‘fit in’ with the Australian population, and as a result could become the ‘invisible migrants’ often ignored and un-researched (Stratton, 2000).

In order to prevent South African women from becoming ‘invisible’ migrants and to prepare them for the possible obstructions in cultural differences that may exist, it is important for these women to understand the Australian culture, and how these possible differences may influence their adjustment to the new country. Research in this area can assist in the process by providing both practical and theoretical insight into this issue.

The purpose of the study was to explore how reasons for migration and cultural distance influenced the adjustment experiences of South African migrant women residing in Western Australia. The project was gender specific due to the lack of knowledge regarding women in this context. Within this rationale the following questions were examined:

1. What are the adjustment experiences of South African migrant women residing in Western Australia?
2. How do reasons for migration influence these experiences?
3. How does perceived cultural similarity influence these experiences?

Methodology

Research design

The present study involved a qualitative research design. A descriptive phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1999) was adopted, for which the subjective experiences of South African migrant women were of primary importance. Phenomenological research analyses lived experiences and attempts to make sense of these experiences; to describe and understand them (Polkinghorne, 2005). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggested that one of the basic tenets of phenomenological research involved interpretation of the particulars of lived experiences in
order to render meaning to the experience. This involved collection of data from people who had experience of the subject being investigated, and from what they communicate to the researcher, to develop a description of the ‘essence’ of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The essence comprises forming deep understanding of composite experiences (le Vasseur, 2003). Essentially discovering how push factors or involuntary migration factors for migrating to a similar culture influence adjustment experiences, it is necessary to know about what the lived experience of South African migrant women hold.

Paradigm and Assumptions

The rationale for this design choice was driven by Polkinghorne (2005), who promoted data collection methods which had vertical depth allowing for explanation, understanding and reflection and would enable participants to explore meaning of their experience. Qualitative phenomenological based interviews would allow researchers to direct or rephrase questions enabling collection of information which would be multilayered and complex in nature reflecting the true nature of issues under examination.

Participants

South African migrant mothers residing in Western Australia became the focus of the study for they provided a unified group (Moustakas, 1994), and enabled the researcher to analyse the adjustment experiences of these women; whether their reason for migrating and cultural similarity influenced their experiences. A total of 13 South African migrant mothers residing in Western Australia for 4 to 6 years, voluntarily participated in the study. This criterion was set to include those who had experienced a significant amount of adjustment by achieving the required four to six years residing in the new society (Markovizky & Samid, 2008). The number of participants was in line with criteria set out by Moustakas (1994) and Wertz (2005) to provide quality of data and valuable findings. The participants were selected via a purposive sampling method that aimed to select information-rich cases for in-depth study to examine meanings,
interpretations, processes, and theory (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Participants were recruited via fellow students with knowledge of potential participants. One student provided the researcher with contact details of his friend’s mother who met the criteria of the study. This participant was contacted and willing to participate. A snowball effect then occurred (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005). Some of these women were contacted via telephone by the researcher, whilst others initiated contact themselves following snowballing. Maximum variation sampling (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) was used to select participants based on factors such as their language and work status. Thus, eight participants were English speaking and five were Afrikaans speaking South Africans. Five of the participants were not working, four worked from home, three worked part time, and only one worked full time. An information letter (Appendix A) and an informed consent letter (Appendix B) were distributed to participants prior to the interview.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The data were collected using semi-structured, in depth, individual interviews (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) which were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews took place at a mutually convenient location agreed to between the researcher and participant. The interviews were conducted between August and September, 2009. Interviews varied in length from approximately 30 minutes to one hour. Five open-ended questions were used in the semi-structured interview allowing individuals the flexibility to openly discuss their subjective experiences (see Appendix C). The questions were followed by additional prompts when a particular point needed elaborating or clarifying which helped develop rapport, hence facilitated the collection of rich data.

The five Afrikaans speaking participants were interviewed in Afrikaans, consequently allowing them to feel more comfortable and to answer in as much detail as possible, giving the
researcher the opportunity to understand all their issues. These interviews were translated from Afrikaans to English.

*Ethics*

Approval to undertake this study was granted from the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement of research. Informants were required to complete a consent form once they had read the project information letter prior to participating in the interview. The information letter clearly outlined what the study involved, including a contact list of help services. The consent form stated the confidentiality of information and specified that information disclosed during the interview will remain confidential at all times.

In the transcriptions of the interviews pseudonyms were used instead of informants’ names. The data were accessible only to the student conducting the project and the project supervisor. Digital recordings of the interviews were kept in a locked cabinet during transcription and analysis, and will be erased following the preservation period.

*Data Analysis*

The analysis of the data began with the digital recordings of the interviews being transcribed verbatim, using a process known as thematic analysis outlined by Jefferson (1984). The transcripts were read multiple times and personal biases of the researcher were identified (Cresswell, 2007), such as sympathy toward the informants’ experiences or comments which may have led their responses according to the researcher’s own values and preconceived ideas. Although the researcher is a South African migrant, her experiences were slightly different than that of the participants, being without a family and migrating voluntarily.

The data were then analysed using the thematic content analysis. Significant and common themes such as reoccurring concepts, statements and words were identified, labelled and coded on the transcripts. A colour-coding method was further used to identify the themes in the transcript,
recognising both individual and group themes. The data were then reduced into a table, identifying the significant themes, issues and exemplars from the transcripts. A method of reflexivity was employed through note taking during and after interviews and throughout the data analysis as a means of protecting the rigour of interpretations. Finally, the reduced data were written up in a concise but detailed thesis, reflecting the participants' adjustment experiences as a South African migrant mother in Western Australia, with respect to the influence of reasons for migration and cultural similarity.

Findings and Interpretations

Thematic content analysis of the data revealed four major themes: Involuntary migration; coping; coping strategies; and cultural distance. In each of these major themes, recurrent sub-themes and concepts are identified; these are presented in Table 1. The findings and interpretations will be discussed in relation to these themes, sub-themes and concepts and how they bear on the research questions. The discussion will be illustrated with extracts from the interviews and interpreted with reference to previous research.

Table 1

 Themes and Sub-themes of South African Mothers Experiences of Migrating to Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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<td>Involuntary Migration</td>
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<td>Affirmative Action</td>
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<td>Coping</td>
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Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance

Social Support

Motherhood and Priorities

Education

Domestic Support

Coping Strategies

Integration

Contact with Family

Cultural Distance

Similarities

Dissimilarities

Involuntary Migration

Safety

The first question in the interview focused on the reasons why the South African women left their home country. Ten women in the sample perceived themselves as being pushed out of their country (Bennett & Rigby, 1997; Johnson, 2009; Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Moller, 2007; Pernice et al., 2000; Wagstyl, 2002). For example one informant said:

... it wasn’t out of choice, you know that some British come out of choice or maybe for the weather... some people come here out of choice, ours hasn’t been... mine wasn’t: “Oh... Australia the land of gold, it was oops... South Africa... dangerous... rape...” Rape was a huge factor in our decision. We had... you know how suddenly something happens... we had about three or four of our friends raped literally a few months before we decided to come, and having three girls and myself... that was a big issue.

Similarly, one participant said:

So I would not have left South Africa if the economic and political situation hadn’t worsened in my eyes.

As evidenced by the quote above, it is clear that many South Africans are reluctant migrants and can be described as “anticipatory refugees” according to Kunz’s (1973, p. 131) theory. The
women identified that the experience of violence, crime and political instability significantly influenced their decision to leave South Africa:

> definitely mostly was crime... safety... we had quite a few friends killed. My husband was working for Chubb [security company in South Africa], so we saw a lot.

Similarly, one informant stated how she felt defenceless with her children growing up in a dangerous country such as South Africa:

> at the time that we had our second son, my one concern was... when I had only one boy... if I was high jacked I could take one boy out of the car, but when we had the second boy I just freaked. I just felt like I couldn't protect two children. So that was a key thing... and we happened to experience two robberies around that time... and that just highlighted for me the real danger.

The lifestyle in South Africa is explained as being “a hostage in your own house” feeling unsafe where ever you go, as one informant said:

> ...even just going to school wasn’t safe... leaving your house... even inside your house.”

In addition, the women reported that living with fear of crime on a daily basis was adding to distress:

> we used to sit at our swimming pool area in South Africa with a gun hidden on the lamp, because people just jump the wall... it was nice [sarcastically]; no one could see what they were doing to you behind the wall.

The women stated how living with fear every day was overpowering and stressful:

> It’s absolutely suffocating to be constantly worrying about safety. Was it your turn today? You know, every time the phone rings, is that going to be another friend who’s been shot or raped or whatever? And we’ve got friends who moved here after tragedies like that, and they took such a long time to heal... such a long time...

These findings support previous literature that the experience of crime in South Africa even if not first hand, contributes to the psychological distress experienced by these immigrants (Khawaja & Mason, 2008). However, women in the present study did share that close family were attacked and that the fear of everyday exposure to violence was not worth risking:

> My cousin was murdered... I think that was the final straw for us... My sister was high jacked, my dad was high jacked. My uncle owned a garage you know, those little quick
shops. He and his family were held at gunpoint. We just thought when will it happen to us? Um... nothing ever did happen to us, but to our family it did... and we thought we're just not going to risk it.

The loss of liberty and danger to life became more important to the informants than staying in their home country (Khawaja & Mason, 2008). One informant reported that criminal violence caused boundaries with no freedom and little room to develop as an individual:

"I wanted to be somewhere where I could develop my personality and I couldn't do that when I was so busy worrying about basic things like safety. I want to be able to sit on the beach and think about where I'm going in life without worrying about somebody stealing my bag. So that was probably for me, my personal motivation; was more about that...I mean I had no space to grow in a place where I'm just living from a security point of view."

These findings illustrate that the quality of life in South Africa prevented these women from living a normal life in many ways and provoked stagnation. Everyday day conversations revolved around negative incidents, as one informant reported:

"in South Africa, the only discussion was who slaughtered who... who was murdered... who was raped... whose kid was kidnapped? All our dinner time discussion was around horror stories.

Moreover, there was a general consensus in the current study that Australia will secure the women, their husbands and children a safer and better future with more opportunities, and provide them with a better quality of life.

"Because my boys have gone from having absolutely no future in South Africa being white males, to whatever opportunities they want to take up, which is so much available to them [in Australia]... it doesn't matter what their colour and their sex is really."

**Affirmative Action**

One strong pushing force for migration was 'affirmative action' (Bennett & Rigby, 1997; Johnson, 2009; Wagstyl 2002), which limit the opportunities for advancement, particularly for the women's husbands being Caucasian males. One informant explained how her husband's career came to a standstill:
My husband kept coming up against blocks in the workplace because he wasn’t black, and the promotions were going to the Ethnic group... and I just thought what’s going to happen when the boys are adults, they’re not going to have any opportunities being in the minority.

Similarly, one participant reported that her husband’s career was not secure:

My husband is British and in his career he needed to... with the employment equity he needed to train people to basically take over his job. So his career in “De Beer’s” was not safe being a white Brit in South Africa.

**Planned Migration**

Indicating that the migration was planned, further confirmed the women’s anticipatory refugee status to which they belong, unlike the acute refugee with the emphasis on escape and no time to plan their relocation (Kunz, 1973). One informant reported that her husband intentionally moved to Australia at an earlier stage with the purpose to arrange a home, vehicle and school enrolment in preparation for the remainder of the family on their arrival:

My husband started [his work position] in September and the children and I stayed behind until the end of December. So by then he had everything sorted. He found a house and a car, the basics were already organised and I think that’s a big thing... so when we got here we had the house, the car, the school was organised and everything else was in place.

This migrant cohort entered Australia through the skilled migration program and therefore many were secured of employment on arrival. In addition, some companies provided settlement agencies and temporary accommodation to help these migrants to settle in:

They [the company] paid for everything and they put us up for a month and paid accommodation, and they gave us a settlement agent which was very helpful...

**Coping**

**Guilt**

While securing their own personal safety, there was also reluctance in such a dangerous environment, to leave everything behind that is familiar and loved (Khawaja & Mason, 2008). The women did not want to leave their extended family, however did not have a choice. They
therefore described feelings of guilt associated with leaving extended family behind in an unsafe environment. For example, a number of informants reported that they felt obliged to care for their parents in South Africa, and consequently felt guilty for not being able to do so:

*I wanted to be with my family in South Africa to support my parents because I felt guilty being here and not with them...*

The women reported that they were concerned about the safety of her family and friends who remained behind which triggered guilt:

*But there’s this guilt about those who you’ve left behind. You think... well you know how does that work? What about my mum and dad, and my sister and brother?*

Whilst the women were equipped to visit their extended family in South Africa, they could not return permanently. This finding relates to Pernice et al’s (2000) argument that involuntary migrants do not have the privilege to move back to their home country as in the case of voluntary migrants. One participant explained how they prepared themselves with the essentiality of settling in, having no option of returning to South Africa:

*You know we didn’t come here thinking; well... if this isn’t going to work out we can go home. And so once we got here you kind of had to make it work... we couldn’t turn around and say this was too hard I’m going home.*

The above comment revealed that the women experienced excessive guilt not only for being concerned about the safety of their extended family in South Africa, but also knowing that they may never reunite with their extended family and motherland on a permanent basis.

**Grief**

The presence of what many called mourning or grief was a contributing factor to the distress experienced by the women in the study. Grief referred cumulatively to the loss of the home country, and separation from extended family and friends:

*I call it mourning... I mourned when we arrived here. I felt like I had... somebody had died. I think I still feel like that.*

The women experienced distress in the context of grief as they revealed difficulties in coping:
...as much as I still feel like somebody has died and for me, since the move, it's been harder to cope with day to day things... you just do.

One participant in the study reported depression while grieving for her extended family:

I needed to go on antidepressants for almost two years.

Social Support

Loss of social support was a significant theme in the data. The informants experienced difficulties being geographically isolated from their extended family with no support:

...not having any support system [in Australia], because we used to live very close to my mother [in South Africa]... three kilometres from her house. She assisted us with the children; picking them up from school... that helped me you know...

Similarly, one informant expressed missing family:

I miss my family, I find that the most difficult.

Furthermore, the informants experienced difficulties on arrival as family and established friendships were absent:

I think we knew there was nobody for us. We had nobody... we didn’t know anybody here, so we knew that was going to be hard. It was just going to be the four of us basically...

The study indicates that lack of social support from extended family and friends resulted in feelings of loss and isolation:

We arrived at Christmas time and there was a strong sense of “we’re lost,” because there wasn’t a family Christmas. There wasn’t a family get together, so there was this desperate feeling that we’re far away from everything we love and everyone we love...

Feelings of distress were experienced as a consequence of being isolated, no support network, loneliness and missing the extended family. It was stated:

There was no one here you know... there’s no family... it’s terrible... it’s so sad. I’ve tried to... not let the girls [her children] see all the stresses, so... I might have been quicker to throw in the towel sometimes or give up... Emotionally no one can understand it, and I don’t think when I’m fifty or sixty... I don’t think I’ll be anymore settled.

Similarly, one participant emphasised her feelings of distress:

Ah... it’s terrible... I feel so lonely... I feel in a way it would be easier if you die sometimes... you don’t feel like you belong...
Previous research has shown that psychological distress during migration is associated with factors such as loss, and the lack of social network and support systems (Khawaja & Mason, 2008; Ward, 2003).

**Motherhood and Priorities**

The women were focussed on the needs of their immediate family fulfilling their role as a mother and wife in the new setting, whilst dealing with a lot of additional challenges and obstacles during migration (Ahmed, Stewart, Teng, Wahoush, & Gagnon, 2008; Remennick, 2005). The women reported that they were concerned about their migrating family and they felt responsible to support them:

*I feel the mother is the centre of the whole family because you’re concerned about your husband and his career and his stress, as well as each child in a different way. You also worry about your family in South Africa, you have a household to keep up.*

There was a general consensus in the study that the children were the women’s first priority and that they had placed themselves second:

*I’ve never put my own needs first; my first priority was to make sure my child was alright.*

Similarly, another participant reported coming second to children:

*but coming over as a mother of children... their [my children] health, happiness and their settling in was the most important... a mother tends to come second, so you’ve just got to deal with it.*

Some of the informants acknowledged that they sacrificed themselves on a physical and emotional level to support their direct family settling into the new social structure to such an extent, that they neglected their own adjustment in the process:

*my child was my first priority because she had to struggle because of a decision that my husband and I made. My role as a mum was more important to me than my own adjustment. So what actually happened was I haven’t worked on my own adjustment... and I think I’m still struggling with it...*
In particular, the stories of the women interviewed reported identity loss as a result of sacrificing themselves for the family:

*I think sometimes being a mum... you try and protect your kids and you lose a lot of yourself at the same time; so I feel like I've sacrificed my own identity in the process... you know I've lost a lot of my personality...*

Another informant explained how she experienced identity loss, exacerbated by being without anyone to talk to:

*you try and protect your kids and you lose a lot of yourself at the same time; so I feel like I've sacrificed my own identity in the process... you know I've lost a lot of my personality and I keep saying to myself we have done it for the kids. There was no interaction... I mean the only time I actually really got to speak to an adult as such was when my husband got home. I mean it's fine, you go to the school but you're the new person there...*

It was this need for multiple adjustments in behaviours and attitudes in a short period of time, which resulted in psychological disorientation and loss of self-identity (Bennett & Rigby, 1997).

*Education*

In light of the above for example, stressors such as ‘children skipping a grade in school’ were commonly identified as an important component of migrating from South Africa to Australia. One large adjustment was that all women emphasized the struggle around the fact that they were uninformed about age and grading of children in Australian schools. They did not know that children attend year 1 at a younger age in Australia than in South Africa. The informants reported that they were not prepared for this and worried them immensely:

*The initial thing was they had to skip a grade, because no one tells you that the starting age at school here is six and not seven. So my daughter went from building puzzles and playing with play dough in a pre-primary setting to year 2 and having to read and write, and she broke down... confident girl in South Africa, sort of top of her class, she’s done all her school readiness tests and they said she’s going to do extremely well. So she was ready to do phonics and basics and here [in Australia], regardless of age... and they wouldn’t make an exception at all, they shut her into year 2 where all the kids could read and write. That troubled me terribly, and I did a crash course in phonics during the school holidays, and that was awful... awful...*
The above comment indicates that migrants require resource structures to guide them before their actual migration (Bürgelt, Morgan, & Pernice, 2008), as the women in the study also recognised the need to be informed about the Australian culture and government matters pre migration:

...you almost think that you need a tip-sheet when you come in through immigration.

**Domestic Support**

With the loss of family support, the issue of domestic help was also a significant theme to emerge from the data and is unique to this migrant group. The women had domestic employees in South Africa prior to migration, leaving their daily routine significantly different to their experience in Australia post migration. For example, one informant said:

*We are spoilt in South Africa with domestic help and I found that very difficult.*

Coping with regular domestic chores without social and domestic support the women were accustomed too, was found to be challenging:

*It was a culture shock... I mean in South Africa you’ve got the maids to do everything... suddenly “ka-boing...” It was quite an adjustment to try and organise your life especially when you’ve never done it... to get the washing, the cleaning... I mean I’ve always done the cooking but to get the washing, the cleaning, the fetching, the this and the that... It’s a huge adjustment.*

Most informants stayed at home to participate in child rearing and household chores, therefore did not rejoin the workforce where networks could be established:

*I just found it really hard because I wasn’t used to looking after my kids. I used to work, so all of a sudden I had to become a full time mother and I wasn’t used to it... so I found it really hard. You know I gave up a promising career and now I’m sitting at home mopping floors... that wasn’t what I chose in life... it wasn’t.*

A prolonged adjustment (Beiser & Hou, 2001) seemed to be the result of motherhood priorities, no domestic help and the lack of social interaction:

*I think on my own it took me much longer to go through my adjustment process.*

**Coping Strategies**

**Integration**
The relationship between acculturation and stress depend upon the style of acculturation being experienced (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Berry et al., 2002). The informants varied in their descriptions of acculturation. Most of the women emphasized the importance of integration in regards to coping with adjustment difficulties. Important to them was the establishment of support networks to alleviate the isolation experienced. The informants expressed that they tried to integrate with the Australians. For example, one informant said:

...we tried to meet the Australians and do the Aussie thing.

Similarly, one participant reported that she was eager to know the Australian culture:

I was totally willing to get to know their [the Australian] culture because I moved here. I can't say I'm moving to Australia and only reinforcing our [South African] culture onto myself and my family. We are in a new country with a different culture now, and we've decided that we will get out there and get to know this culture to find a medium between where we are coming from and where we are going to; to find a medium between the two cultures... to make it easier for all of us.

These findings support previous research, demonstrating that integration is the preferred (Van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998), and most effective strategy of acculturation of the majority of migrants (Berry et al., 2002; Schmitz, 1992). The women realised that they had to make the effort to integrate and accumulate a social network with people from the host country, which eased the integration process:

I recognised I needed to build up a network, so I started giving Pilates lessons at home for people that were interested, I made sure I went to a gym, I joined a book club you know you, you have to make the effort to integrate...

These informants focused on making a definite effort to approach the adjustment process in a positive manner. Moreover, they developed healthy adaptation to Australia:

I just feel so privileged to be able to live here and bring my kids up in a relatively safe place where we can develop ourselves. We can evolve in terms of who we are as people and what we can contribute to the world.
Whilst the South African women were able to selectively absorb many aspects of the culture in Australia, there was an element of rejecting those aspects that they did not find fitted with their cultural norms. This demonstrated the perfect example of integration when maintaining the original culture while also adopting the new culture (Berry et al., 1987; Berry et al., 2002).

Integration was encapsulated in the following quote:

...so I allow some things to influence me, like vocabulary and informality and that sort of thing because I accept that, it still fits with me, but there are other things I choose rather to influence.

Two women in the study had rejected the new culture which indicates ‘separation’ (Berry et al., 1987). One informant said,

We’ve never ever went out of our way not to be friends with Australians. There’s a definite click [among the Australians], do you know what I mean? Maybe also not integrating... a lot of them [Australians] have already got their established friends...

These two women were not motivated to adapt to their new environment. For example, one of these informants reported directly that she has not adjusted:

It was difficult [to adjust], I think it still is.

Although five of the informants were Afrikaans speaking, language factors will not be a point of discussion for this may be a complex area itself outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, whilst these differences in the sample did not affect general acculturation experiences; it was interesting that one Afrikaans speaking informant reported that Afrikaans speaking migrants do not integrate with the Australian culture; she argued they do not have the need as there are many Afrikaans speaking South Africans in Australia to socialise with, such that there was no need to integrate:

A lot of our South African friends don’t really make friends with the Australians and I think the reason for that is not because they don’t want to or because they find anything wrong with the Australians, it’s not that they don’t make Aussie friends at all, but they don’t socialise with the Australians the way we socialise with each other over weekends, and I think the reason for that is because there’s so many South Africans in Perth... you sometimes don’t feel like talking anything else but Afrikaans
so why would you? I think it’s just more convenient, that’s what we are familiar with... I don’t have a problem with their [the Australian] culture at all, but I think the problem is that we keep to ourselves a bit too much, because we don’t really need to [socialise with the Australians]...

Contact with Family

The women identified contact with extended family remaining in South Africa as another essential emotional support. Through phone calls, emails and even visits on a regular basis these migrant families keep in touch to help them cope with stresses living in Australia:

communication with the people back in South Africa was important... so there was a lot of texting and emailing and telephone calls and things like that... so you know, it wasn’t totally broken. I think looking forward to a next holiday keeps everyone going. And as long as there’s a holiday booked, everyone keeps going and we keep working towards that.

Unlike many other migrants, the majority of the women are in a financial position to travel to South Africa or to support their family financially to visit them in Australia:

We had a trip home every year, paid for by the company.

Cultural Distance

Similarities

The majority of women supported Wagstyl’s (2002) finding that Australia was one of the favoured destinations to migrate to, for they perceived Australia as offering the type of lifestyle and culture into which they can integrate. The women stipulated that they have chosen to move to Australia specifically, for the similarities between the two cultures simplified the integration process:

...let me put it this way... I think our culture is similar, much more than for example England or America. And I also think the style of living is similar to what I was used to in Cape Town.

As a result of the British influence on South African culture, South Africans assumed that relocating to a country where the culture was similar to their own, may be less stressful and
Reasons for Migration and Cultural Distance

will likely facilitate easier acculturation (Segel, 1995). One particular quote encapsulated the above literature:

I’ve adapted easier in Australia because their lifestyle is similar to South Africa. If I had to immigrate to any other country, I think it would have been far more difficult than moving to Australia. But Australia’s way of living... there were a few things that made me realise it can’t be too tough to adapt to Australia.

Moreover, one informant stated “I don’t feel like I need to change my culture to be able to fit in here,” and they found adjustment in Australia less complicated, accepting Australia as their “home.”

We don’t talk about going home when we go to visit South Africa, we are going to visit in South Africa and this [Perth] is home.

These data support literature that when cultural distance is perceived as very similar between two countries, it may be hypothesised that the individual feels motivated and able to learn more about the new culture (Zlobina, Basabe, Paez, & Furnham, 2006).

Dissimilarities

Finally, cultural dissimilarity was recognised in the different ‘values’ of the host country. Connected to their focus on family adjustment, the women found the moral values of the Australian child rearing not as disciplined compared to their own culture:

we come from another country [South Africa] with different values, with a different way of growing up... we believe strongly in discipline with our children which I found is not a big issue over here [in Australia]. I find it difficult to bring my children up in a country where the rules and values are totally different, but I still try to practise these values in our household with my children.

Generally, these South African women as migrants perceived Australia as offering values which they can readily integrate. Therefore, the study does not support previous literature and illustrates that the women struggled with the more lenient values and discipline that their children are exposed to in Australia. The women reported they couldn’t be the same kind of “casual disciplinarian that I found my Australian friends are,” and that they tried to retain this part of their culture to facilitate their children with cultivated nurturing in the home.
environment. They found it difficult to rely on the public school system to address these areas, believing that the private school system would accommodate to their satisfaction in terms of values and discipline:

...that’s one of the reasons why I decided to send her [my daughter] to Peter Moyers Private High School. You know where they learn respect and self discipline and so on...

Although in the minority, some women identified a gap between their expectations of the Australian culture pre migration and what they experienced in reality post migration. These women expected the culture to be more similar:

I think that we have a false sense of security coming over here because you think you’re coming from a similar culture, you think you’re coming from the same culture. You think you’re going to arrive here and it’s going to be sunny skies... they’re [the Australians] all going to love rugby and everybody’s going to think the same as you think. Then you arrive here and you say little things and you do little things and you get these very funny looks...

Similarly, one woman said:

Everyone said you know its mini South Africa, especially Perth so you just assume that it would be another city somewhere else... but not another world. I expected the culture to be a lot more similar to South Africa and I don’t find that it is that similar. I mean obviously... there are similarities but it’s not... it’s not as close as they make you think, I don’t think so.

These women who experienced reality different from their expectation were exposed to adjustment problems:

I think it was difficult. I don’t think I’ve adjusted to be perfectly honest. Yes... you’re getting more familiar with what needs to be done not to rock the boat. I don’t know... I think South Africa will always be home. And I think until you can actually say that Australia is home... I don’t know if you have then adjusted. I’m not there yet... I really do think it’s hard.

O’Grady and Lane (1996) argued that cultural aspects which appeared to be similar and familiar between two countries may turn out to be very different than expected (that is, familiarity may breed complacency in anticipating the need for ‘adjustment’). Thus, assumptions of
‘similarity’ prevent immigrants from learning about fundamental differences (O’Grady & Lane, 1996). One informant supported this literature:

*I think you can be mislead because the similarities are so big or so many; like the same language and that... but it’s the finer ones [differences] that you have to be more careful of you know... You know it’s so misleading... because it’s so similar you get mistaken into thinking this is similar you know... obviously the same English... you know if it had been more different... different everything... So the differences are subtle but big in some ways.*

Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to explore the adjustment experiences among South African migrant women residing in Western Australia; how their reasons for migration and cultural similarity influenced their experiences. Reasons for migration were linked to violence and criminal activity in which the women found they were pushed from their home country. Further encouragement for migration was ‘affirmative action’ causing job insecurity. Therefore, South African migrants are involuntary and can be described as ‘anticipatory refugees’ (Kunz, 1973). These women required a new life in a safe environment offering better opportunities in employment and education. This migrant cohort planned their migration process which is a distinctive characteristic of the anticipatory refugee; although pushed from their home country, they arrive prepared in the country of choice.

These women experienced guilt and grief with the possibility of leading to distress, leaving extended family behind in a dangerous South Africa and being geographically isolated from their home country. Whilst they were able to visit family regularly, they realised they may never return to reunite permanently. This led to the presence of grief that might be experienced more intensively than by those who are voluntary migrants.

This study has highlighted several issues which the women confronted on a daily basis whilst adjusting to the new setting. Many of these issues were not anticipated, such as the age difference of children in the Australian school system and the lowered standards in values. Supporting their immediate family during transition was first priority for the women,
prolonging adjustment of some participants. For example, the women were uninformed of the starting school age in Australia. This experience was found to be stressful where additional time was spent supporting their children to better cope with this obstacle. The Australian values were experienced to be lower than the expectations of moral standards the women conveyed to their children. These women attempted to retain this part of their culture to facilitate their children with cultivated nurturing in the home environment, and by enrolling them in private schools with the belief of exposure to stringent rules and regulations not apparent in government schools.

Unique to this migrant group, was the issue of domestic employees. After arriving in Australia, daily routine was significantly different with no domestic support which they were comfortably accustomed. Most of the women stayed at home to participate in child rearing and household chores, an entirely different lifestyle from what they were used to pre-migration. Whilst dealing with domestic chores and supporting the immediate family to settle in Australia, prevented a number of the women rejoining the workforce where networks may possibly be established, leaving the women with a sense of social isolation.

A coping strategy utilised by the majority of women was to aim for full integration as their style of acculturation (Van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998). Most women were able to selectively absorb many aspects of the Australian culture; some rejected those they did not find positive, whilst maintaining parts of their original culture. Therefore, most women actively accumulated a social network with people from Australia and reported a healthy adaption following a residing period of four to six years. Another coping strategy was to visit extended family in South Africa or to support family financially to visit in Australia. Most women were in the financial position to do so. This is a characteristic of the anticipatory refugee, to be in a financially sustainable position.
The women have specifically chosen to move to Australia, with the perception that the South African and Australian culture is similar. Most of the women experienced the cultural distance between South Africa and Australia to be sufficiently similar where Australia offered the type of lifestyle into which they could integrate. These similarities facilitated a simplified integration process. Although in the minority, some women experienced discrepancies of their expectations and the realities of the Australian culture, possibly putting them at risk of healthy adjustment.

**Implications**

The result of the study provided both practical and theoretical insight for migration agencies, the Australian government, support services, Australian mental health professionals, therapists and those working in this area to address South African migrant women. Mental health professionals should consider how these clients' political and historical background shape the ways in which they cope.

Furthermore, the findings emphasise the importance to reinforce guidance to South African migrant women during the settlement period by providing necessary information and support for this specific cultural group. Further development of settlement services, is necessary in order to improve health outcomes for this unique group of anticipatory refugees. This necessary information should be readily accessible via websites, embassies in South Africa, Australian airports and local government offices of Australia. Information should include detailed specifics of the Australian culture for example, the education grading system, values, and lack of domestic assistance.

It is suggested that migration agencies in South Africa should make a conscious effort to provide and promote counselling services pre-migration. Information and preparation of the migrants to the unanticipated factors such as the education system, dissimilarities in values, and have the understanding to deal with guilt and grief from leaving extended family behind. Hence
the migrant will be informed and equipped on arrival, in order to reduce the impact of migration and the possible negative reaction to a new way of life, and to endorse healthy adjustment by identifying issues which could be anticipated.

Migration agencies should aim to have above mentioned information available to South African migrants prior to migration, regarding ‘living in Australia.’

Future Research

This study has identified other areas within this field where research is required. One area for further research is to determine whether Afrikaans and English speaking South African migrants experience adjustment to a similar culture differently, in order to understand the phenomenon of South African migrants more comprehensively regarding acculturation.

Another area for future research is to explore the adjustment experiences of South African men migrating to Australia, and family units as a whole. The research would be beneficial, in that the results may contribute to the development of support services for South African men living in Australia.

Therefore, in conclusion, the study provided an understanding of the experiences of South African migrant women. The findings show that the South African women are involuntary migrants (anticipatory refugees); being pushed from their home country as a result of violence and crime, however, they arrive prepared in the country of choice. Concerns for extended families left behind in an unsafe South Africa resulted in feelings of guilt and grief, causing distress. Feelings of loneliness due to the foreign setting in combination with being isolated from friends, family and all that is familiar, further added to distress. Supporting their immediate family to settle into the new country without the domestic support they were accustomed to, caused them to neglect their own wellbeing, therefore, prolonging the adjustment process. Cultural similarity was related to the anticipation of unproblematic adjustment. Apart from the differences in values, the variation in school age entry and the lack of domestic support, the culture was experienced to be
sufficiently similar for healthy integration. The majority of the women integrated positively in a period of four to six years; this may possibly be a result of the cultural similarity experienced. Those who experienced discrepancy between their expectations and the reality of the Australian culture may put them at risk of unhealthy adjustment. The findings from this study are important for further development of settlement services in order to improve health outcomes for this unique group of ‘anticipatory refugees.’
References


Appendix A

Information Letter

My name is Ida Steyn and I am currently completing my Honours in Psychology at Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Campus. This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements of a Psychology Honours Degree. I appreciate your interest in this study and your input is valuable.

The aim of the proposed research is to extend the understanding of South African mothers’ experiences and the impact of challenges during immigration to Western Australia, for three reasons; the effect on mothers in this context haven’t been studied, transition is potentially forced, and transition to a similar culture rather that to a dissimilar culture. To take part in the research you must be a South African mother living in Western Australia between 4 to 6 years.

It is hoped that the study will assist in identifying key issues, stresses and concerns for South African mothers living in Western Australia that will lead to improved services, information and support for immigrant mothers.

It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 1 hour to complete. The interview will be conducted discussing your experiences as a South African immigrant living in Western Australia. The interview will be digitally recorded and conducted in a relaxed, conversational style. I will be interested in anything you have to say regarding the topic and there are no right or wrong answers to this interview.

Information given throughout the interview will remain strictly confidential between my supervisor and me, with any identifying information being omitted from my final research presentation. At no time will any details regarding your identity be disclosed.

Your involvement in this study is voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any time without penalty, and no explanation or justification is necessary. If you withdraw from the research, you also have the right to withdraw information that has already been collected. It is possible that some people may find the discussion could cause some distress. Counselling and further support can be obtained if necessary by contacting myself, my supervisor or the fourth year coordinator (details below).

If you are interested in the results of the research project, I will be pleased to share it with you upon its completion which is scheduled for October 2009. My contact details are listed below.

If you are considering participation in this research, it is requested that you complete the informed consent document. I will then contact you to arrange a mutually convenient meeting time and place for the interview.

If you have any questions about the research or require further information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle (6304 5192). Alternatively, if you wish to speak to someone who is independent of the research project, please contact the fourth year coordinator, Dr. Justine Dandy (6304 5105).
Contact Details:
Ida Steyn: Mobile: [REDACTED] Email: isteyn@student.ecu.edu.au

Thank you for taking the time to consider helping with this research.

Ida Steyn
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

I, ____________________________________________ have read the information sheet Provided and agree to participate in the research study to be conducted by Ida Steyn of Edith Cowan University. I understand the purpose and the nature of the study and am participating voluntarily. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction and I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a postgraduate (Honours) Psychology degree and acknowledge that it may be published. I understand my name and other demographic information which may identify me will not be used. I understand that I can refuse to answer questions and withdraw at any time. I realise there will be no penalty should I cease my participation. I also give permission for the interview to be audio recorded and understand that the recording will be erased once transcribed.

Signed: Research Participant

Date

Signed: Primary Researcher

Date
Appendix C

Interview Schedule

Before we begin, I would like to thank you for your time and decision to participate in my research. I am sure your comments will be valuable. If you need to stop this interview for any reason just let me know.

Answer the following questions from a mothers' perspective;

1. What were the factors determining your decision to move to Australia?
2. What were your experiences of adjustment to the new setting?
   - Have you experienced any positive/negative experiences post arrival in Australia?
   - Do you think your adjustment living in Australia was difficult or not so difficult?
3. Did you have any strategies in place to deal with these problems?
   - What strategies have you used to deal with these problems?
   - What strategies have you developed to deal with these problems?
   - Were there any services that helped you settle in?
4. I am interested in your role as a parent/mother. How have your experiences of adjustment and any coping strategies been influenced by this role?
5. In your experience, do you think this culture is similar or dissimilar to your own? If so, how has this interacted with your adjustment strategies?
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