

Belonging to two worlds: The experience of migration

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ABSTRACT

Migration is one of the most enduring themes of human history. It is one of the most drastic life changes and transitions an individual can face. Each person's reaction to migration is unique; migrants may either experience stability and opportunity or a sense of emotional uprootedness, or in fact, all.

Key words

Migration, Social support, Identity

Author's note

Having recently migrated to Australia from South Africa, I was curious to know about the experiences of other South Africans who were in the early stages of migration. Over the last decade South Africa has experienced severe political, social and economic uncertainty, as well as increasing levels of violence and crime. For these reasons, many South Africans have chosen to leave their country of birth. By 1992 South Africa had one of the world's highest crime rates, on a per capita basis. In 1994 South Africa had the highest per capita incidence of rape recorded from anywhere and from then to 1996 the total annual number of rape cases reported nationally increased from 42 429 to 50 481. The 1996 homicide rate of 61 per 100 000 placed the country among the most violent in the world. According to a Health Review released in 1997, violence is the leading cause of injury mortality in South Africa. A report from the World Economic Forum declared that South Africa's organised crime is second only to Colombia's, with its frightening drug cartels, and Russia's, with its omni-present mafia. According to a recent study, the rape homicide rate in one of South Africa's major cities, Cape Town, is 12 times higher than in the United States, which is an entire nation. (*The Star* newspaper Internet site).

As a consequence, many South Africans have made the decision to build a safer, more secure life elsewhere. While many choose to settle in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, a large portion of South Africans choose to begin their new life in Australia. South African immigrants perceive Australia to offer the type of lifestyle, values and culture into which they can readily integrate. According to the Australian Immigration Statistics Internet site, the immigration of South Africans to Australia has risen steadily over the last decade. Between 1984 and 1988 14,700 South African's immigrated to Australia. Between 1997 and 1998 there were 4,281 new immigrants, and between 1998 and 1999 there were 5,024 South African immigrants. The latest Census in 1996 recorded 55,755 South African-born persons in Australia, an increase of 14% from the 1991 Census.

It would seem as though anyone living in South Africa would want to leave and that a feeling of total relief would be the full story. But, I am one of those and relief is not all there is. Instead, a blend of powerful emotions is deeply felt and the psychological repercussions, far-reaching. It is my belief that migration entails one of the most extreme forms of rupture at the social level and the intrapsychic level; it involves alterations in the external reality that rebound in each individual's internal reality.

INTRODUCTION

"We cannot, we should not, we must not disavow our heritage lest we lose more than we gain. New amalgams of old and new enrich us all" (Pollock, 1989: 145).

In view of the fact that familiar patterns of being and relating to others are dislocated, and one finds oneself in an environment that is unknown and different¹, migration is an experience that has profound and far-reaching consequences for each individual.

^{2,3,4,5} In this paper, the term "migration" alludes to a condensation of emigration (leaving the homeland) and immigration (arrival in the new land).

Various models in the literature attempt to illuminate the impact of migration and the process of change.^{6,7,8,9,10} One tacit dimension that all of these models have in common is the psychological disruption that ensues during the migration process. A careful appraisal of the literature exposes a number of salient themes that highlight the impact of the migration experience.

DECIDING TO MIGRATE

This theme signifies the commencement of the entire process. The "rational choice model" of decision-making implies (more or less explicitly) that people always migrate in order to enhance

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their objective situation – to earn more money, enjoy greater political or religious freedom, escape various forms of oppression, or in some way seek a better future for themselves or their children.⁴ However, various studies have shown that the desire to migrate is often prompted by psychological attributes of the decision makers and is strongly influenced by non-rational considerations – a tendency to seek thrills and challenges; to depend on one's own skills; and to favour new frontiers and wide interpersonal spaces.⁴ While the decision to leave the homeland may have a rational backdrop, it may implicate much more of the individual's personality.

A BLEND OF POWERFUL EMOTIONS

The entire process of migration is believed to be overwhelmingly affect laden.⁴ Relocation rouses feelings of fear, euphoria, insecurity, loneliness, uncertainty, excitement, anguish, discontentment, distress, and hope.^{4,9} The affective response to migration cannot be dismissed as a momentary reaction and must be seen as ongoing.¹⁰

MOURNING THE LOSS

One essential theme that becomes apparent in the literature concerns the numerous losses that are endured when an individual is separated from their homeland. A country, its tangible environment, the nonhuman quality, is a separate object the person relates to, a separate object that needs to be mourned when it is left behind. Numerous migration researchers aver that the stress and resulting strain of elective leaving results in responses very similar to those of the grieving process.^{2,3,6,7,11,12}

Espin observes that in migration the lost object is elusive and the loss all-encompassing.¹¹ Hence, there are countless losses that need to be tolerated – a loss of home, of a sense of belonging, of familiarity and security, of close relationships, of resources, of a social network, and loss of identity.^{1,3,4,6,7,11,12,13}

Grief work is vital and requires the individual to emotionally endure the pain that accompanies the loss. Aroian (1990) proposes that this is achieved by way of confronting that which was lost and abandoning over-idealized connections to old bonds prior to reinvesting emotional energy into new ones.³ Hence, grief resolution symbolizes an "emotional goal" and is a "past-oriented" tactic that demands strength to be able to recollect and relive the past in order to resolve earlier attachments.³ Even when the novel situation is a positive one, mourning what was lost, for the most part, is a crucial requisite for fully appreciating the transition and feeling contented with the new. Pollock proclaims that an internal "mourning-liberation" process facilitates the process of healing the loss and allows for successful adaptation to the new world without relinquishing all connections to one's birthright that are precious, desirable, and ought to be passed on.¹² He notes that without separation and individuation human beings would be unable to develop. Therefore, it seems that the challenge is in being able to mourn that which is gone, to retain the cherished parts of the old world, and to embrace the new world.

NOSTALGIA – A POTENTIAL PITFALL

With the mourning comes a yearning for what has been lost and left behind. De Vryer beautifully describes nostalgia as "a longing for a past forever lost, for one's childhood, for the country of one's childhood".² She suggests that it is characterised by a "bittersweet" feeling - heartrending on the one hand, gratifying

and calming on the other. It has been suggested that nostalgia can be seen in all responses to losses and changes.¹² Pollock goes further to propose that while it may possibly facilitate the cherishing of origins in affect and fantasy, it can also block successful adaptation if it becomes a predominant obsession.¹² Although it seems necessary to realize one's loss, one ought to be careful not to become immersed and stuck in the past.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Of the countless parameters that can accentuate the major way in which migration impinges on the individual, one of the richest is a rigorous scrutiny of the changes in personal social networks prior to and following the transition. Sluzki suggests that the social network defines one's social niche and contributes significantly to one's sense of identity, well-being, competence, and agency.⁵ But what then happens to these vital intrapsychic qualities when the social network undergoes massive disruption? The circumstance of relocation disturbs and transfigures the network, creating gradually a new map that is a fusion of the remnants of the old network and new connections that become incorporated as time and social interactions permit.⁵ Thus, networking is a continuing collective and individual process. Social support has been found to be a valuable factor in strengthening the individual's coping mechanisms and contributing to the transition into the new culture.^{9,12,14,15}

GROWTH AND CHANGE

While it is apparent that departing the homeland is traumatic and the initial resettlement period imparts copious social and psychological challenges, we must be careful not to perceive migration as a solely pessimistic experience. Less pessimistic approaches to the exploration of migration have found that migration and resettlement can present evolving possibilities, such as personal growth, hope, freedom, and discovering and creating new psychological places.^{3,16}

ADAPTING TO THE NEW WORLD

The unique and personal attributes of the migrant will shape the manner in which he/she responds and adjusts to the new world. Resilience, flexibility, openness, and strength are valuable personality features that can facilitate successful adaptation.^{11,15,17} The process of adaptation is not linear; the manifold intrapsychic and behavioural transformations necessary for effective acculturation occur at various levels and may ensue at a different pace at each one of those levels.¹¹

TRANSITION OF IDENTITY

The consequence of the fierce encounter with the new country, combined with the mourning process triggered by the loss, causes a threat to the migrant's identity. The stability of one's own interpersonal relations is dislocated and "the sense of continuity of the self, the sense of same-ness is threatened."² No longer is there the consistent affirmation of one's identity in interaction with the environment and consequently, one's identity moves into a liminal state of transition. In this "psychological in-between space" the migrants may question, reconsider, and reflect on the meaning of who they had been in their homeland as they move towards repositioning themselves in new environments.¹⁶

The notion of transitions in identity has an extensive history and it is lucidly illustrated in Van Gennep's timeless text *Rites de Passage*.¹⁸ He focuses on diverse transformations in an

individual's societal role, dependent on their arrival at socially defined thresholds. A *rite de passage* in fact comprises three rites:

- (1) Separation – from a role formerly held in society
- (2) Transition – an indeterminate state where one is not what one was nor yet what one will become
- (3) Reincorporation – the reintegration of the person into his/her new role in the community

To be able to “feel at home” is a promising vision of what is possible. Aroian, suggests that this positive affective state of psychological well-being signifies the end product of psychological adaptation to the experience of immigration.³ In an ideal world, the migrant ultimately progresses to a new ego identity, merging the identification with the old with a healthy identification with the new.

CONCLUSION

It is no surprise that migration undoubtedly leads to an extreme form of disruption at both the social and emotional level. The traumas however, must be adjusted to, adopted, and encompassed, if migrants are to reconstitute themselves and their lives. Connections with the past have to be appreciated but recognized as now broken. The healing of the hurt of loss is not easily accomplished, but when the mourning process is finished, as far as it can be, what is gained can be invaluable - life goes on and can have new rewards and new fulfillments.

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COMMENTARY

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The psychological and emotional well being of immigrants has been debated since Jarvis in 1855 noted higher rates of

psychopathology in the Massachusetts, USA, pauper class which consisted of many Irish immigrants.¹ The question of whether immigration and acculturation itself is a risk factor for mental illness continues to be debated.

Three processes need to be considered when examining immigrant mental health, pre-migration, immigration, and post-migration health and risk factors. It is debatable as to

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whether immigration has a major influence on mental health or its outcome. Marginalization and minority status, socio-economic disadvantage, poor physical health, starvation and malnutrition, head trauma, collapse of social supports, mental trauma, and adaptation to the host culture are all factors that have been suggested to impact on mental illness among immigrants.² Those who choose to immigrate, however, are a self-selected group who may differ from their community of origin, perhaps based on personality factors such as willingness to take risks and are individuals who have been successful in overcoming and negotiating difficult obstacles despite the trauma they may have endured in the process.³ It has been argued that perhaps this may engender better mental health and decrease the risk for disorders. There are at least two distinct groups of immigrants, those who are pushed out, refugees, and those who are pulled to a new country, economic and political emigrants.

Most studies on refugees have shown these groups to be highly vulnerable to psychological distress and psychopathology. Studies of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Bosnian immigrants highlight this literature.^{4,5,6} Risk factors for successful resettlement are dependent on prewar factors, exposure to violence, and resettlement factors.² Prewar factors include sociodemographic variables, history of mental illness, earlier life events, coping strategies, and social support. Exposure to witnessing war, seeing death, and being injured, as well as imprisonment, actual combat experience, loss of resources and disruption of social supports, the intensity of the exposure, and cognitive reappraisal of the events may modify the psychological consequences. The resettlement processes for the refugee also may lead to additional risk factors depending on the access to basic needs and services, level of arrival distress, secondary traumatization, coping skills, and available social supports.

Many immigrants, as in the South African situation, are pulled to new countries in search of a better future for them and their offspring. As these individuals are not necessarily highly traumatized the current psychiatric literature has suggested an outcome that contrasts markedly with those of refugee groups. Most of the data available is based on Hispanic immigrants to the United States. Vega et al. found the rates for a lifetime major depressive episode to be lower among immigrant Mexican Americans than those born in the USA (5.2% versus 14.8%).⁷ A finding consistent with earlier data from the Epidemiological Catchment Area (ECA) survey.⁸ Interestingly, the Vega et al. study also found that those Hispanics born in the United States had much higher rates of disorder; highlighting, that individuals who choose to immigrate may have better mental health. Such a finding that immigrants may be healthier has also been shown in physical health measures, and not just mental health.⁹ The role of acculturation in predicting mental health remains weak and questionable.¹⁰ The choice of country to which one immigrates is also a consideration that may influence psychological well-being. Im-

migrating to countries that are less "culturally distant" may be more protective, as noted in a study comparing Soviet-Jewish immigrants to Israel and the United States, where despite the greater economic success of the immigrant to the United States those who went to Israel had better psychological health.¹¹

Clearly, as Goldin illustrates, South Africa is an increasingly dangerous place to live resulting in many individuals choosing to immigrate; yet, most do not. Certainly, any major life event has its negative and positive emotional consequences. Whether or not immigration has significant psychological sequelae is highly questionable. The long-term consequences on the child of the immigrant remains an issue that requires further investigation.

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