



# Meaning and Experience of International Migration in Black African South African Families

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## Abstract

This article explores the experiences of some Black South African families affected by international migration. Historically, emigration from South Africa has occurred in waves, and has been associated with specific political moments. Such migration has often been perceived as a predominantly “White phenomenon”, but recent trends reveal a more complex picture. Prior research on Black migration has focused primarily on internal labour migration, exilic migration and the “brain drain” phenomenon of medical professionals. So far, little research has been done on the impact of international outward migration on the Black family system. This article addresses this gap, drawing on a larger qualitative project exploring the impact of South African emigration on elderly family members staying behind. The findings highlight the significance of close relational ties in the Black South African family system. Familial separation through emigration brings feelings of loss and apprehension for the wellbeing of family members living abroad, including potential racism in destination countries. Migrants abroad highlighted the value of family and of maintaining a Black South African identity, despite separation from the country of origin and the extended family. Significantly, migration is often perceived as a temporary state, in contrast to White South African counterparts. Given increased international migration, the results shed light on the interplay between racial identity and emigration, and the impact of international migration by Black South Africans on family that they leave behind.

**Keywords** Black South African families · Identity · Those staying behind · International migration, · Transnationalism

## Introduction

Political exile as a form of temporary emigration from South Africa during the apartheid years is a well-known aspect of South African history, but little is known of international migration trends among Black Africans since 1994, when the new post-apartheid government was elected. A steady stream of South Africans continues to leave the country to work and live abroad, including people of Black African descent, but thus far, little research has been published on the psychological consequences of international migration

on Black South African families<sup>1</sup> (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012b, 2017). In this article, we examine the impact of international migration on Black families and how it is experienced both by those who leave, and by those who stay behind.

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<sup>1</sup> We are aware of that the use of “racial” labels still used in South Africa even by the post-apartheid government is not indicative of biological differences. Such labels are often controversial, and a source of pain and distress. In this paper, we use the term “Black” only to refer to South African citizens of African descent (this particular part of our bigger research project did not include people of Indian, Asian or mixed descent, or “White” people of any form of European descent). In no way do we intend to imply that all Black people have similar experiences when it comes to (e)migration. However, given the dearth of research exploring Black African families’ experiences of international outmigration, we believe it is important to reflect specifically on this group as a way to include these often ignored experiences in the research around South African emigration, without essentialising such experiences.

## South African Emigration

Migration and mobility are embedded in the South African economic and socio-political landscape (Bennett et al., 2015). Like the history of Black African internal migration, South Africa's international migration history is complicated by issues of race, class and politics. There was always a steady trickle of migration, but the larger waves of pre-1994 migration were often linked to specific political moments. Today, the exodus of families from the country continues (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012a, b), although accurate migration statistics are difficult to establish. It appears that recent White international migration is informed by high levels of violent crime, political instability and the precarious economic climate (Crush, 2011; Ferreira & Carbonatto, 2020; Höppli, 2014). Black migration among Black health professionals, notably female nurses, is another documented trend (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012a), but has generally been understood as part of the (predominantly White) "brain drain" phenomenon (Crush, 2000, 2011).

## Migration and Families

Migration is never a singular individual event (Falicov, 2005); the migration of a family member has an impact on the family structure, and on functioning in the home and destination countries (Hugo, 2002), irrespective of the country or culture of origin. According to Chang (2015), (e)migrants may even suffer mental health challenges arising from a loss of status, material goods and their native culture. Migration uproots people, through displacement, including loss of identity and traditions (Malkki, 1995). Emigrants may feel a form of cultural bereavement in their post-migration experience (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). However, Neimeyer (2000) refers to family structures as interconnected social systems. This implies that when a family member emigrates, a process of redefinition, regrowth and redistribution also begins in the environment that the emigrant leaves behind (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012b). Family roles and responsibilities have to change as family members adapt to the emigrant's absence (Pitkänen, Korpela, Aksakal, & Schmidt, 2018). The whole family system is significantly affected, often with a negative impact on family members remaining behind. Traditionally, migration literature has paid little attention to the experiences of those left behind (Baldassar, 2007a), but the focus has recently shifted to include them (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012b, 2017). This event and its aftermath include a sense of "ambiguous loss", which refers to ambivalent

feelings when loved ones are no longer physically present, but remain psychologically present (Boss, 1991, 2009). The loss may also be likened to Doka's (1989) construct of "disenfranchised grief", which he describes as "the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (p. 4).

Recent research has highlighted the role of information communication technology in ameliorating these processes (see Baldassar, 2007b), allowing families to construct a shared "(co)presence" and to continue relationships of care despite geographical distance (Baldassar, 2008). The greater ease of international visits today also assists in maintaining transnational relationships (Steiner & Wanner, 2015), although the privilege of the possibility of such visits was strongly highlighted by the curtailment of these opportunities by Covid-19 restrictions across the globe during the pandemic.

Schiller et al. (1992) first used the concept of transnationalism to describe an emerging migrating population which has at its disposal various networks, activities and ways of life that reflect their countries of origin, and their destination countries (Marchetti-Mercer, 2017). Silver (2011) argues that from this perspective, we acknowledge the fact that the families they leave behind still play an important role in migrants' lives. A sense of kinship can thus be maintained across geographical distance (Bertolani et al., 2014, p. 1473). A transnational perspective allows one to consider both sides of the migration spectrum, namely those who emigrate, and those family members who remain behind in the country of origin. Transnationalism was thus deemed to be an appropriate theoretical lens to understand the data collected in this research project. It is particularly useful for family therapists working with migrant families—Falicov (2007) urges that new "analytic frames for understanding family relationships and devising interventions" (p. 158) be developed to address the therapeutic and theoretical challenges posed by the transnational lifestyles of today's migrant populations. This lens also allows us to reflect on the experiences of those who do not emigrate, and on the nature of the relationships between those who have emigrated, and those who stay behind. Until recently, research on the experiences of non-migratory family members tended to be limited, compared to research focused on the experiences of migrants entering a new country, but this is changing (see Baldassar, 2007a; Marchetti-Mercer, 2012a, b). More recent research has begun to focus on the emotional impact of the departure of children and grandchildren on the psychological functioning and well-being of older people and other kin left behind (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012b; Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2020). Parents left behind often feel ambivalent at the departure of their family members, because they want

the best for their children and grandchildren, but also feel a significant sense of loss.

## The South African Black Family

Apartheid has unquestionably affected deeply the configuration, construction and progression of the Black African family system (Madhavan et al., 2008). The labour migration systems generated by colonialism, poverty, industrialisation, and urbanization have altered families' nuclear normative structure (Morwe et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the concept and practice of shared care remains central to most Black African families: individuals are understood to be interdependent; enduring reciprocity is highly valued (Bozalek, 1999). Children are considered responsible for caring in the family—looking after younger siblings, domestic chores and sometimes finding employment to contribute to household earnings. This responsibility continues well into adulthood and today often implies a long-term financial obligation, often referred to in South Africa as 'Black Tax' (Ratlebjane, 2015).

Conversely, a significant element of reciprocal caring in Black households includes the important relationship between grandparents and grandchildren (Mtshali, 2015). Statistics from the Social Trends Institute (Scott, Wilcox, Ryberg, & DeRose, 2015) indicate that approximately 70% of children share a home with family members other than their mother and/or father (typically grandmothers). Grandparents perceive themselves as intrinsically connected to the health and welfare of their children and grandchildren (Chazan, 2008). However, with international migration, these intergenerational relationships and the transfer of indigenous languages and culture may be interrupted (Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Also pertinent is the notion of place attachment—the emotions individuals attach to certain geographic locations (Kaltenborn & Bjerke, 2002). Basu (2005) and McGregor (2008) argue that first-time African migrants tend to have a strong sense of patriotism and consider their native country to be their real home, to which they wish to return. Egoz (2013) refers to rooting, uprooting and re-rooting as metaphors reflecting a deep relationship between a person's identity and the land. This may deepen an understanding of the Black family's sense of attachment to its land of origin even after emigration.

In light of the above theoretical context, the research questions below were posed at the beginning of the research project.

## Research Questions

- What are the experiences of family members remaining behind when adult offspring migrate?
- How do the family members who remain behind cope with the reconstituted family structure and the new family dynamics?
- How do those who have (e)migrated experience their migration process?
- How do those who have (e)migrated experience their relationships with family members remaining behind?

## Method

This article draws on data from a larger qualitative study on the impact of international migration on South African families and emphasizing the elderly left behind. Employing a family systems framework (Bowen, 1985), each family was treated as a discrete case study, as recommended by Yin (2018).

## Background on the Larger Research Project

The larger study (Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2020) focused on the migration, mainly of qualified professionals, since 1994, after the demise of apartheid. The study looked at the impact of emigration on those family members who remained in South Africa, especially the parents of emigrants, who tended to be older individuals. A total of 23 families participated, with demographics ranging across the different racial categories still applied in South African society (see Footnote 1). Of these families, 11 were White, six were Black South African, four were Indian, one was mixed race, and one was African international (Zimbabwean). Interviews were conducted with members of the family who had stayed behind, mostly elderly parents. We also included seven siblings left behind and involved in the care of their parents. Interviews were also carried out via Skype with most of the family members living abroad and, in three instances, in person, with adult children who had emigrated. These interviews were held between 2015 and 2017 (Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2020). This article focuses only on the six Black South African families.

## Sampling

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used throughout the study. All the participants discussed in the current article were recruited by the first author. Participants from Black families where international migration had occurred tended to know about other families who

**Table 1** Interview profiles

Family	Parent in South Africa	Age	Living arrangement in South Africa	Adult child overseas interviewed	Age	Destination country	Family of adult child in destination country
Family 1	Gogo	84	Old-age home	Sally, daughter-in law	66	US	Husband, 3 children
Family 2	Ruby	66	Alone	Angie, daughter	36	UK	Separated, 2 children
Family 3	Dudu	61	Husband, 2 daughters	Phindile, daughter	26	Netherlands	Single
Family 4	Daisy	60	Mother (84), nieces and their children	Neo, daughter	42	US	Husband, 2 children

had experienced emigration and referred to the first author to other families. Therefore, participants were primarily obtained through referrals, which guided suitability, and increased the likelihood of willingness to participate. All the participants who agreed to be interviewed were female. This may provide a somewhat gendered perspective, but this gendered distribution is not uncommon in research concerning families (Charles & Davies, 2011).

### Participants Relevant to the Current Article

Six Black families were identified from the larger study's population, and a total of 10 participants were interviewed for this leg of the study. Six Black African participants over the age of 60 whose children had migrated were interviewed. In four instances we had matched pairs and we were able to interview one of the related adults who had migrated and left family behind. We would have liked to have had matched pairs in all six instances, but for two families, the adult children who had emigrated did not wish to participate in the interviews. For the purpose of this article, to make our findings more consistent, we therefore discuss only the four case studies where we had matched pairs. The participants and their connections are listed in Table 1, which summarises the interviewee profiles. The emigrants were located in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and in the Netherlands.

More details on the four different case studies are given below.

The interviewees from Family 1 were Gogo and Sally. Gogo is an 84-year-old Black South African woman, now living in an old-age home in a predominantly White Afrikaans-speaking neighbourhood, in a Johannesburg suburb, in Gauteng. She moved there for the sake of safety and convenience after her adopted son, Moss, his wife, Sally, and three children moved to the US in 1995. The family have moved several times since Moss and Sally married. In Kentucky, where Sally wanted to study at a theological college where most students were White, she found it difficult being in the minority. She misses her family back in South Africa. She and her husband plan to return to South Africa at some stage.

The participants in Family 2 were Ruby and Angie. Ruby is a 66-year-old Black South African professional woman who is divorced and lives alone in an affluent suburb in Johannesburg. Ruby has one daughter, Angie (aged 36 years), who lives in a small town in the UK. Angie has separated from her White English husband, and has two young children, one of whom has special needs. She is unemployed, but teaches netball and is studying part-time. Ruby has travelled regularly to visit her daughter and grandchildren. Angie has considered returning to South Africa, but feels that the UK provides better support for her special needs' child.

The participants in Family 3 are Dudu and Phindile. Dudu is a 61-year-old Black married South African professional woman. She lives with her husband and two younger daughters in an affluent suburb of Johannesburg. Her eldest daughter, Phindile, lives and works in the Netherlands on contract. Phindile is a qualified chartered accountant, but left her job at a multinational corporation to pursue an acting and singing career. She was in the Netherlands as a cast member of the Netherlands production of *The Lion King* at the time of the interview. Phindile is single and has no children, and she was adamant that her emigration to the Netherlands is temporary. However, Dudu admits to regularly checking on social media to see whether Phindile has a boyfriend, which might result in her choosing to stay in the Netherlands permanently.

The participants in Family 4 were Daisy and Neo. Daisy is a 60-year-old single Black South African woman. She shares a home with her elderly 84-year-old mother, "Koko", along with several nieces and their children in Soweto, a predominantly Black township in Johannesburg. She has one adult daughter, Neo, who lives in New Jersey in the U.S., where Neo has two jobs (as a PR consultant at a hospital and at the YMCA). Neo is married to an African-American and has two young sons. Neo entered the US on a student visa and worked as an au pair. She feels that her "family back at home in South Africa" is in a better economic situation due to the regular remittances she sends. She is considering returning to South Africa with her family, but is doubtful. Daisy misses her daughter and her grandchildren and wants Neo to come back home.

## Procedure

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held with those remaining behind, and Skype interviews were conducted with those living abroad. Interviews lasted between 45 min and 1 h. Questions focused on participants' experiences around the impact of migration. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were transcribed by a professional ethically bound to confidentiality and by the first author, who is multilingual, as two interviews were predominantly conducted in Sesotho and isiZulu.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was given by the University of [name withheld for peer review]. Written informed consent was obtained prior to interviews, which were conducted in English, with clarification, where necessary, in Sesotho and isiZulu.

## Data Analysis

Data gathered from the interviews were analysed using thematic content analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), using their suggested six guidelines as well as trying to establish trustworthiness (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules 2017).

In Phase 1, we familiarized ourselves with the data: reading and re-reading the data transcribed (see above), noting the most prominent ideas. During this process we began documenting theoretical and reflective thoughts, as well as initial ideas about potential codes and themes. The first author kept detailed field notes as well as a reflexive journal while she was conducting the interviews.

During Phase 2, the first and second author generated initial codes by systematically coding interesting features of the data according to the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. During this phase the three authors held a number of meetings, as well as de-briefing sessions, to discuss emerging codes in order to ensure researcher triangulation.

Next, in Phase 3, the first two authors looked for themes by collating codes into potential themes, and gathering all the data applicable to each potential theme. Again, all three team members held regular meetings and drew diagrams to make sense of the connections between the themes. Detailed notes were kept regarding developing concepts and themes in hierarchical order.

In Phase 4, we reviewed the themes, checking whether they worked in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2). We generated a thematic "map" of the analysis. All the team members met to vet the themes and subthemes. We also returned to the original interviews

(raw data) to look for key quotations and test for referential adequacy.

The next step, Phase 5, involved defining and naming themes in ongoing analysis by all three authors, refining the specifics of each theme, and the overall story of the analysis. This process led to the generation of clear definitions and names for each theme. The three authors came together to gain consensus on the themes and document these carefully. We then applied the different themes to the different case studies.

In the final step, Phase 6, a final research report was produced, offering a final analysis opportunity, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). While the first author took responsibility for this report, the other two authors assisted in this process, checking on the procedure throughout. In the final report, the process of analysis and coding was described in detail. Reasons for the theoretical, methodological and analytical choices taken throughout the study were reported in detail.

This process allowed us to group patterns of data reflecting the subjective lived experiences of family members. Consequently, a rich thematic account across the whole data set was produced, as recommended by Nowell et al., (2017, p. 4). Eight main themes were identified, as discussed below—quotations are included to enhance accuracy and reliability, as recommended by Morrison and James (2009).

## Self-Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity in the research process speaks to the manner in which researchers view that which will be studied, while also observing themselves. According to Jootun, McGhee, and Marland (2009), the act of reflecting on a research process while recognising one's subjectivity enhances the credibility and integrity of the study. Reflexivity describes the researchers' constant self-reflection on their own assumptions, prejudices, morals, and conduct, as well as those of the participants (Parahoo, 2006). The first author is a Black woman who had to reflect deeply on her own role as both an insider and outsider in the research process, as suggested by Creswell (2007). It was advantageous in the research process to her to use a shared sense of South African Blackness as a primary tool for gaining understanding and information. The second author is a White woman with a personal history of migration, which may also have affected her own views of the process of migration. The third author was also a White woman. All three authors have had to face the loss of friends and colleagues through migration in recent years. We were therefore careful to reflect on how this might have affected our reading of the data. The discussions we held throughout the data analysis process were useful in this regard.

## Results

Eight main themes were identified from the interview data.

The first was the importance of maintaining a Black South African identity. This theme refers to the importance that participants ascribed to maintaining their Black South African identity, which was closely connected to the importance of familial relationships as well as maintaining their mother tongue.

The second was a fear of the unknown, both among the emigrants and their family members in South Africa. Those in South Africa felt fear and anxiety regarding their family members' migration and their safety. The emigrants themselves also underwent moments of fear and anxiety, and distress at the unfamiliar circumstances in their host countries.

The third theme was the importance of family and a sense of "home". South Africa was still perceived as "home" on both sides of the migratory spectrum and loyalty to family still living in South Africa was closely linked to a sense of belonging.

A fourth theme was the important role that grandmothers play in the family system. Despite the fact that grandchildren emigrated with and/or lived with their parents abroad, grandmothers still played an important role in their lives. This was evidenced by visits by grandmothers to provide their daughters support with the grandchildren.

The fifth theme was family restructuring following emigration, as the emigration of one child often required other family members to take over certain responsibilities, including emotional roles, in the household left behind. In some instances, those left behind "replaced" the emotional gap left by a missing child by letting another family member move in with them.

The sixth theme was maintaining transnational relationships in families. Familial relationships were maintained via the use of a number of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) as well as visits from both sides of the migratory spectrum. Coming back to South Africa for family funerals was deemed very important, but there were times when logistical limitations made this difficult for participants.

The seventh theme was experiences of racism, where, in some instances, participants back home were fearful that their children would be exposed to racism while living abroad. Some migrants did indeed encounter incidents involving racism.

The eighth theme was the belief that international migration is a temporary state. Family members left behind preferred to see migration as a temporary absence, insisting that South Africa was still "home" for their migrant children. Some of those who had emigrated held more ambivalent perceptions—some considered coming back to South Africa,

but were cognizant of the advantages that living abroad held for them.

We now discuss the different themes identified as they relate to the specific case studies. Interviewees' voices are reflected in italics. For interviews that were in English but where interviewees used non-standard grammar, the original wording was retained verbatim. Interviews conducted in IsiZulu or Sesotho were translated into English.

### Theme 1: Importance of Maintaining a Black South African Identity

All four pairs of participants stressed that it was vital to maintain a Black South African identity, which for them, involved the kind of familial support typical of extended family, and/or retaining their language.

Gogo explained that attending her children's graduation in the U.S. to provide familial support and affirmation to them offered an important validation of the role that extended families play in Black South Africans' identity. She said: "*We must go, what about the children that side? It'll seem as if they're orphans!.... and also, they must see somebody—a family who cares.*" In her turn, her daughter-in-law Sally tried to instil and maintain certain African family values in her children whilst living abroad, and associated these values with speaking their mother tongue at home, even though they were living in the U.S.: "*They should know that they are Blacks before they are anything else. [...] so I am glad that we maintained that...authenticity and nobody has lost their language.*"

Similarly, Ruby commented on the significance of close emotional family ties, including extended families, and her belief that such structures were absent in the U.K., where her daughter Angie lives: "*...and you know how White people are, they don't care for extended families!*" To replace such ties, and to her mother's relief, Angie ended up making friends with other women from African countries, as she felt a mutual connection with those women, not only because they come from a similar cultural background, but also because they share the same values: "*I've made friends with a Ghanaian lady and a Zambian lady and they've become the closest thing I have to home [...], not because they are Black, it is just because we have the same kind of beliefs.*"

Dudu was also relieved that her daughter Phindile had befriended a Black isiZulu speaking family in the Netherlands. Phindile missed not hearing African languages where she lived, and she remained very proud of her African roots, saying that there are "*lots of White people everywhere, speaking a foreign language. I don't hear people having a conversation in isiZulu or Sesotho...I don't have that anymore. [...] but] we came in with our very Black ...*

*[laughing] selves...And [we are] very African and very proud of that...".*

Daisy felt that language as a challenge when she visited her daughter Neo, who had built a life in the U.S. with her African-American husband and their two sons. Like Sally, Daisy believes that one's language is an important part of one's identity, so Daisy regarded her grandchildren's inability to speak an indigenous South African language and the fact that they speak English with a foreign accent as culturally dissonant: *"I can't hear with their American accents. I can't really hear their English..., they start sounding like that father of theirs..!"* This seemed to make her feel more alienated from her daughter's children, as Neo and her husband speak English to their children at home, and did not seem concerned about the loss of Neo's mother tongue.

## Theme 2: Fear of the Unknown

The unknown and unfamiliar space that the (e)migrants entered was a source of anxiety, both for those anticipating the move, and then actually making it, and for the mothers remaining in South Africa. Some of their fears were in fact realised, as some indicated how hard it was to be in a place they did not know.

Gogo was initially very concerned about her children when they emigrated to America, as an unknown space: *"My greatest worry was...that they went to a land unknown, like from Jerusalem to Egypt. Now I'm worried about how they are doing."* As an emigrant, Sally also commented on the changes they faced when they first moved to America, describing living there as *"just a shock"*.

Ruby's daughter, married to a White British man, faced other challenges, and Ruby was concerned that her daughter Angie in the U.K. would not get adequate emotional support and care from her husband and mother-in-law: *"It is her life; that is what she has chosen and it is sad though."* Angie avoided comment on the support from her husband (from whom she has since separated) and her mother-in-law, but stressed the unfamiliarity of her new surroundings, admitting that her initial time in the U.K. was difficult: *"That was really hard, ...coming to a place that I had no idea I was coming into, a different world, completely different way of life, ...so that threw me."*

Dudu found the relocation of her daughter Phindile to The Hague emotionally distressing: *"I was very anxious. I was torn apart... by the time it got to her departure."* Phindile herself did not know what to expect when she arrived in the Netherlands: *"Like I am separating with all my friends and my family. I have got to start afresh and I have no idea what it's going to be like."*

Because she was unfamiliar with the area where Neo would live, Daisy was concerned about the safety of her daughter Neo abroad: *"When...someone is that side, you think of many things...Maybe something has happened to Neo."* In her turn, being alone, cut off from family, in a foreign country, also made Neo feel more vulnerable: *"Something is going to happen to me.... So that was very hard."*

## Theme 3: The Importance of Family and Sense of "Home"

Family and "home" remained inseparable for these four pairs of interviewees. Physical presence for family events was a sub-theme related to this overarching theme. The issue of permanence was connected to this theme, but is discussed in more detail in Theme 8.

Gogo missed her son's family when they emigrated to America: *"...they'd left me alone... to realise that the only family I have now is in Gauteng"*. Her daughter-in-law Sally also noted how she missed her family back in South Africa.

Ruby was saddened when her daughter Angie could not come home from the U.K. to attend her uncle's funeral, as presence at a funeral is regarded as an important element of family loyalty: *"...so Angie couldn't come to that funeral as well. So you see the disadvantage of being away from home?"* Angie herself was distressed by this situation, and apologetically described the logistical challenges which made attending this family funeral back in South Africa impossible: *"And I couldn't get my passport in time. ...the funeral was on Saturday, my passport arrived on Monday. Ja, I couldn't – it was heart-wrenching."* In Angie's case, she tried to recreate a new "home" by forging relational connections reminiscent of home with other African migrants, who shared her values and beliefs, such as the Ghanaian and Zambian women she met in England.

Dudu lamented the fact that her daughter Phindile was in the Netherlands without family, especially when it came to important events such as birthdays. Dudu was pleased when her daughter met a Black South African family abroad: *"It's going to be the first time that she celebrates a birthday without family. [...] She has made relatives, you know...she introduced us to her Netherland parents."* Phindile herself appreciated having met a Black family which could provide her with some emotional support: *"...when I first moved...I went to church... there was a lady who was South African... we text each other... I go over to her place for a dinner, so it's like I have got a granny here as well."*

For Daisy, South Africa and her family would always be "home" for her daughter Neo, despite fact that she had married an African-American and her children were born in the U.S., as is reflected in her comment that *"Neo must come back home."* For Neo, however, her family is now in the U.S., and although she sees South Africa as home, moving back was not

a strong possibility: “*So I came home and realised that you know what, there’s really nothing for me here, like there’s no future for me here.*”

#### **Theme 4: The Important Role That Grandmothers Play in the Family System**

For South African Black families, grandparents are an integral part of children’s growing up. This theme was one of the most emotionally and culturally sensitive topics, one which caused pain and friction.

Gogo missed not being able to have her grandchildren living with her. As the oldest interviewee, she reflected on the fact that Black African grandmothers are often left to care for their grandchildren when their adult children move away for work in local migration scenarios: “*You know, us Batswana, they should have left behind at least one child here with us. So we help them raise one...this is our custom, you know.*”

Despite international travel costs, Ruby was willing to go to the U.K. to support her daughter with her small children: “*...she called, ‘Mom, please come and help me’...so I went...I obviously have to do stuff for her and help her.*” Angie chose to have her first child in South Africa in order to have her mother’s support: “*We stayed because of the support structure... for three months and then moved back.*”

Daisy’s longing for her grandchildren almost led her to irrational wishes and conflict with her African-American son-in-law: “*I once told him [her daughter’s husband] when I was that side that I was going to keep Damon [her grandson]... he got upset with me... told me I’d get arrested ... wish I could go and just take them and keep them forever.*” Despite such tensions, Neo recalled how helpful it was that her mother visited her for an extended period when her children were born: “*I don’t know, but...with her coming for Damon’s birth and Sean’s birth..., she took weeks from work, you know.*”

#### **Theme 5: Family Restructuring Following Emigration**

In all four pairs, the mother left behind acknowledged the reality of family restructuring and changes in living circumstances for those who remained in South Africa, while most of the emigrating children preferred not to discuss that aspect of the situation in detail. Only Phindile, the youngest interviewee, who was still unmarried, mentioned the altered family dynamic.

Gogo, left behind without any offspring once her adopted son and his wife moved to the U.S., had to move to an old age home when her son emigrated, as she could not live on her own: “*I am tired of my house. It has now become a*

*burden on my shoulders. I chose this place because they have better care facilities.*”

Ruby lamented that she had never spent much time with her daughter when she was growing up, as Angie went to boarding school around Grade 7. At this stage, Ruby feels that she has lost her daughter even further as a result of the emigration: “*You see, now I have lost her, she is gone.*” However, in some ways she talks more to Angie now that Angie is abroad and has her own children: “*Yes we are a bit closer and we used not to do it.*”

Dudu described how household tasks had to be re-assigned once Phindile left the country, and her sisters had to take over certain responsibilities: “*...but then, without her, it meant somebody needed to take it over.*” Phindile was more concerned with the shifts in the family interactions than the household logistics, as she observed certain changes in her family after her migration: “*When someone is missing, it just goes out of balance. So ja things change and I don’t know if it is... I think everyone still has the same level of tolerance for certain things but because there is that missing person who would put out a fire... [intervene in conflict], things change.*”

Daisy’s niece Leah now lives with Daisy and her mother and in some ways seems to have replaced her daughter Neo: “*So Leah has now become my Neo ... I share everything with her, now that Neo’s not here. She’s my sister’s daughter... She’s the one who looks after my mother. She’s very good with her.*”

#### **Theme 6: Maintaining Transnational Relationships in Families**

Two main ways to maintain contact are ICTs and visits.

Gogo used modern technology to communicate with her family abroad, but she still preferred letters as a way of communicating. She explained how regular communication helped maintain family ties: “*One thing I really liked about Sally is the correspondence...She would tell me how they are getting on, and the children at school. I was quite contented. [...] She would continue writing. All the news, like the Sowetan [a local newspaper] and you know when they left, she really used to write. So when they left, we didn’t really separate, you understand? Even when they are that side, I could feel that they were still with me.*” Sally also fondly recalled the days of letter writing: “*We wrote letters back and forth and I don’t know if you would recognize them but there was a time when you wrote...a letter to post by air.*” Other ways of maintaining contact for Gogo and Sally were visits and remittances. Gogo recalls how important it was for her to visit the U.S. for an important graduation as a way to physically provide support for the family abroad: “*Seriously. How was it that I’d gotten to the States? Me?*



Me? And who was I, to be going to America? ...I will never forget that time! That we were there for our children.” Sally recalls how special this visit was: “So when she did come here, wow, it was awesome.” The importance of remittances such as gifts and money also to maintain ties was highlighted by Sally: “...my colleagues used to say: ‘You shop for the whole village in Africa!’”.

Ruby communicates frequently with her daughter Angie, and is available whenever her daughter has problems: “We communicate, we Skype and then fortunately there is WhatsApp now because we had to use a landline which was expensive, so now we Skype or we use WhatsApp; we talk almost twice to three times a day. [...] At that time Angie thought I was a pain but sometimes she would call and she would be crying because she is having problems, maybe it’s the water or something happened, or electricity and then she would call me.” Ruby also visited Angie in the U.K. in order to help when Angie felt she had no support from her family-in-law. Staying in touch with her mother helped Angie retain connection to her country of origin, missing ‘home’, as well as the South African foods which her mother would bring when visiting—she longed for “that South African touch... advice on how to do this and that [and her mother’s cooking] oxtail and samp and all those things ...spices from home.”

Dudu shared that they have a family WhatsApp group to maintain family connections, but she finds that her husband does not always know how to manage the technology: “Baba, check in the group, WhatsApp,.... He was like oh, ah I miss my baby. ... you miss the baby [so much] that you didn’t even have her numbers.” Phindile agreed that her father was not always comfortable with technology: “But my dad is terrible with technology so with him it’s smses [text messages] or I have to call him.” Dudu also related how Phindile’s sisters decided to surprise Phindile with a visit to the Netherlands for her birthday: “For the two sisters, they combined it with something, and that was the impulsive decision. ‘No, I’m going to visit her—where are the gifts? Pack a suitcase!’ Because with family, we don’t do elaborate birthday gifts, but we have always had a tradition.” Phindile mentioned the same event, and how much she appreciated her sisters’ visit “[f]or my birthday which was amazing. Because I...it was funny because we were talking, I think, months before and I was like ‘oh my gosh, it’s the first time I am going to spend my birthday alone’ and it was, ja, it was...going to be really strange for me because I have always been with family on my birthday.”

Daisy also made use of technology to communicate with her daughter and grandchildren. However, she pointed out that when communication becomes irregular, this causes her distress: “This is the phone that Neo sent me from America. So I can WhatsApp, save pictures of [her grandsons]...communicate nicely... These pictures are very special to me.

When I’m really feeling down, I look at the pictures of Neo and the boys and feel a little better. [...] She took so long to call us...I just thought this person is gone from us.” Neo also shared how she maintained her connection with her family, especially when she first moved to America: “...just talking...writing letters to my grandmother and her sister... We were calling, we did buy that card and we would call them maybe once every two weeks or more, at least once a month, and we wrote letters.” Daisy valued her trips to America. She visited her daughter abroad several times, which she recalled with great excitement: “They [her neighbours] also can’t believe that I’ve visited...America. But I tell them, one day is one day. Who knows? They should start playing the LOTTO!” Despite realising that her emigration is probably permanent, Neo described how visiting South Africa to attend important family events such as funerals was extremely important to her: “I was like ‘there’s no way I will stay here.’ I had to go home.”

### Theme 7: Experiences of Racism

Racism continued to be a reality to this cohort—those left behind feared that their children would encounter it, and those who migrated were aware of it in their new environment.

Sally was not prepared for being in the minority when she arrived in the U.S. and the concurrent segregation that she encountered when she first moved abroad: “My challenge was being a minority, you know at home we are 80% of the population...here we are the minority... we were in just a sea of White people. [...] So the first time we went to church here, we went to a church and presumed that well it’s...it will be integrated but guess what? It wasn’t. So okay, now they say...the eleventh hour on Sunday morning...is the most segregated hour in America.”

Angie, who married a White British man, encountered racism in her relationship with her mother-in-law: “I think actually because the children are mixed... my kids are darker...I think it’s hard for her.” Her mother Ruby also observed this reaction: “...and those children, their [paternal] grandmother doesn’t care for them.”

Dudu recalled how news of racial violence in the country where her daughter Phindile lived filled her with terror: “You’ll hear racial issues in the Netherlands, when she had not experienced that. Then when that artist came into the media who was thrown out from the B&B...You get into such a panic.” Although she was not subjected to violence, Phindile herself recalled a number of racist incidents in the Netherlands: “I walk into a restaurant and everyone stares at me because they are thinking what is the Black girl doing here? [...] Black people here just have an identity crisis...I don’t completely blame them because ...they are in a country that doesn’t really favour being Black.”

Although Neo did not highlight incidents of racism in her life in the U.S., Daisy complained about how she was subjected to racial profiling when she arrived in the U.S. to visit Neo: *“You know when I landed at the airport...yho... My bags were searched. You know those people searched everything! Those people have apartheid! They searched me to hell and back! I was so scared.”*

### Theme 8: International Migration as a Temporary Experience

One area related to the sense of “home” is the question of the permanence of the move, and here the answers of the interviewees diverged. There was a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty about this theme.

Gogo was of the belief that her family’s relocation was educationally motivated and therefore temporary: *“In our mind, they are going to school, to the Seminary [...]. So one day I’m sitting with Sally’s mother and we were both wondering when they’ll be coming back. We say it’s been long and they don’t seem to be coming back. It’s already been 5 years now.”* Although she had already lived in the U.S. for a number of years, Sally believed that she and her family would eventually return to South Africa: *“At least when we come back we have somewhere to come back to because our plan is to be here temporarily, you know.”*

Ruby believed that the reason that her daughter Angie had decided not to return to South Africa was that the U.K. system offered her support for her special needs child: *“You see and there, there is a lot of...they get a lot of help and there are charities that do this, charities that do that...you just have to find out their names and they will help you. [...] She is not coming back because of the condition of her child and she is getting a lot of help that side, [more] than she would get here and also she is studying.”* For Angie, returning to South Africa would be potentially difficult: *“I’ve toyed with the idea, but I’m not sure about...what kind of – I mean, it’s something that my mum was going to look into, about the support that he could get at home.”*

Both Dudu and Phindile saw Phindile’s migration as temporary, as it was linked to a contract position: *“It’s an opportunity to live abroad, [...] to break away from an office job and Corporate”* (Phindile).

Daisy was emphatic that her daughter should return home: *“Neo must come back home! It’s for the long time that she’s been gone.”* However, Neo seemed to have more ambivalence about a possible return as she has better job opportunities in the U.S., and her family’s living conditions in South Africa, in a multiple generation home, no longer held a strong appeal. She acknowledged that *“there’s really nothing for me here, like...there’s no future for me here.”*

## Discussion

The migration of children, whether they are adults, or young grandchildren, is almost always an emotive event for families. There were, however, some interesting aspects to how the move seems to have affected the Black families who participated in our study.

Central to the experience of both the emigrants and those left behind was the importance of maintaining a Black South African identity. Whilst the importance of maintaining one’s original cultural identity is found in many migrant groups (see, for example, the work of Berry, 2001), given South Africa’s history of racism, this emphasis is a salient point. Maintaining a Black South African identity became a conduit through which emigrants sustained their connection to their family and culture. Although writers such as Ndlovu (2011) have struggled to define “Blackness”, Mangcu (2008) maintains that the development of a Black identity can be understood through the prism of engagement with Whiteness and racism. This argument was corroborated by a sense of the participants’ “Blackness” which came to the fore when engaging in foreign White spaces, as was highlighted by Phindile, who described herself as *“[v]ery African and very proud of that”*. She added: *“I am not going to be apologetic about my existence you know [laughing]...That’s not how we do things.”* Furthermore, being separated from the familiar sounds of their mother tongue brought about feelings of distress and alienation, as Phindile pointed out.

Many parents were apprehensive about their children’s emigration, as they felt that they were moving into an unknown and possibly hostile place. They were also more fearful of the personal safety of daughters, despite the reality of violence against women in South Africa, as reported, for example, by Sibanda-Moyo, Khonje, and Brobbey (2017). In addition, there was fear that the emigrants might be subjected to racism abroad. This fear might arise from internalised feelings of prejudice and discrimination against Black people (Seekings, 2008), something many have lived with throughout their lives in South African society, especially the older people left behind, who grew up under apartheid. This differs strikingly from the perceptions of White families (Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2020), where parents tended to believe that their children would be safer and lead better lives abroad than in South Africa. The fear of racism is not unfounded – some migrants admitted to feeling conspicuous in overwhelmingly ‘White societies’, like Phindile, who was stared at in restaurants in the Netherlands.

Another notable aspect was the importance of grandparents’ role in Black South African families. Some expressed a great sense of loss at their grandchildren’s living abroad, and they yearned for a substitute child/grandchild. Those living abroad keenly felt their parents’ absence when their

children were small. In some instances, mothers travelled abroad to assist their daughters when grandchildren were born. This finding supported some of the observations of Chazan (2008) and Mtshali (2015) on relations between grandparents and grandchildren. Family roles were often restructured after migration as those left behind had to take on the roles of family members who left, emphasizing the systemic repercussions of migration (Neimeyer, 2000; Marchetti-Mercer, 2012b).

The participants' comments on the importance of information communication technology in maintaining family relationships was in line with research done with transnational families internationally (see Baldassar, 2007b, 2008). Participants reported feeling connected to their family members through different forms of mobile communication, whereas previously, written correspondence prevailed. Although most appreciated the immediacy of communication via such technology, there was also some nostalgia for letters, for example, Gogo mentioned her sense of joy when she got letters. Visits were also a source of reinforcement of emotional ties—despite international travel costs, grandparents, in particular, made regular visits, especially when grandchildren were born. Emigrants' visits back home were often joyous occasions, even when the initiating event was a family crisis—Daisy commented: *“To show that God is funny...the day I was discharged, I just see Neo walking into the hospital.”* Visits were often accompanied by much fanfare, although sometimes emigrants were unable to return home for significant family rituals such as funerals, causing distress and guilt. Unsurprisingly, the death of a family member poses various coping challenges for individuals living abroad (Bravo, 2017), so that inability to return for a funeral compounds feelings of sadness and guilt (Baldassar et al., 2006), and this was emphasized particularly by two of this group of participants.

Consistent with international studies (Falicov, 1998, 2002), our findings illustrate the pervasiveness of the sense of loss felt by migrant families. This may be even more acute due to Black South African collectivist sense of roots, where familial interactions are reciprocal and interdependent, emphasizing shared care (Bozalek, 1999). This is pertinent when a family member emigrates, potentially rupturing the family and a sense of home. We may link it to Mbiti's (1969:109) assertion of Ubuntu: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” A parallel can thus be drawn between the notion of Ubuntu and the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of Neimeyer's (2000) social ecologies, which are especially visible in Black migrant families.

In line with findings reported by McGregor (2008) and Basu (2005), our participants retained a strong sense of allegiance to their country of origin—emigrants and their families stressed that despite the relocation, South Africa remains their real home. This conflation of family and home illustrates the

importance of place attachment for Black families and the fact that deep cultural roots still tie them to their country of origin. Linked to the sense that South Africa remains “home”, strong familial ties were identified. Emigrants lamented the lack of familial support in their host countries. Parents were concerned that their children may find themselves alone and unsupported in their new country, especially at important times such as the birth of a child or a birthday.

Crucially, both those left behind and those living abroad seemed to view migration as a temporary event related to education or employment, although some acknowledged that the move was probably permanent. The perception or desire that international migration is only temporary may be attributed to a strong sense of place attachment; the migration may leave a sense of uprootedness and displacement connoting a loss of identity, familiarity and familial interrelatedness (Malkki, 1995; Stark, 2003). This is again a notable difference from the experience of White families in the larger research project (Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2020), who almost invariably tended to regard migration as permanent.

The limitations of this study are that the research project was conducted mainly in the northern affluent middle-class suburbs of Johannesburg, so findings may not be generalizable to other Black families, for example, those in rural and peri-urban areas. The sample was relatively small and consisted only of women. The families interviewed were middle-class, with varying degrees of affluence, making access to international migration somewhat easier, so their lived experiences may differ from those of families with fewer financial resources (there is a correlation between economically vulnerable families and asymmetrical access to migration). Nevertheless, given the limited knowledge regarding Black South African international migration, the findings do open up new avenues for further investigation.

From a therapeutic perspective, our findings suggest that in working with migrant families and especially Black families, therapists should note that larger socio-political conditions may have an impact on these families' experiences of migration. Furthermore, it is important to understand the impact of migration on cultures that value strong extended family affiliation, because the psychological consequences of migration may be multi-fold. It may be essential to involve both those who have migrated, and those who stay behind. The move to teletherapy which we have seen since the Covid-19 pandemic may make it easier for therapists to include all members of the migratory spectrum. However, the use of teletherapy also requires therapists to be cognizant of a number of ethical and professional issues. Therapists may need to pay special attention to key areas such as privacy and confidentiality, data security and professional licencing across jurisdictions (Johnson & Aldea, 2021). These issues are particularly important when working online and especially when working with clients living abroad.

## Conclusion

This article addresses a lacuna in research on the impact of international migration on Black South African families. This research was essential, because the experiences of Black families seem to differ from those of White families (Marchetti-Mercer et al., 2020), and may in part reflect a historic lack of social and economic resources amongst South Africa's Black population, a lack which poses challenges in accessing the international migration space.

Our participants' experiences provided significant insights. Some spoke of a fear of racism in the destination country, possibly born out of South Africa's apartheid history, its current race relations and global politics. Consistent throughout participants' accounts is the strong attachment to their families and country, which is reflected in their clinging, with few exceptions, to the belief or hope that international migration is only temporary, which was not common in other groups. Our study highlights the significance of Blackness and attachment to one's culture. Notably, the emphasis on family and reliance on communal support in Black families remains crucial (Robinson, 2013). Thus the clinical implications of this study suggest that the impact of contemporary migration on the Black South African family has far-reaching consequences for human well-being, as well as psycho-social consequences on both the migrant individual and the family remaining behind.

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**Data Availability** The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available, because when ethical clearance was obtained from the Non-medical Ethics Committee of the University of the (name withheld for peer-review) it was agreed that only the three authors would have access to the data collected as part of this project.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no competing interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

**Ethical Approval** Ethics consent was obtained by the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa Human Research Ethics Committee(Non-medical) R14/49.

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