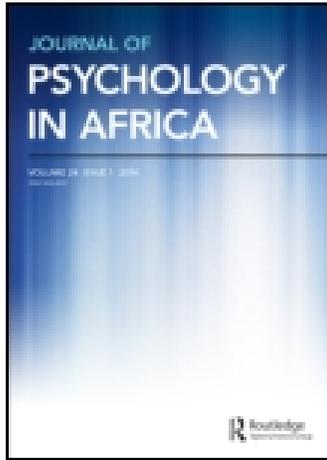


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# African Migrants' Experiences of Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: A Relational Approach

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**This study explores the experiences of African migrants in relation to South African citizens in the course of xenophobic violence in South Africa. In a secondary data analysis of a larger research project, 44 migrants (both men and women with ages ranging from 18 to 50 years) were purposively selected data obtained through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. The relational experiences between the African migrants and the black South African citizens occurred in an interpersonal context, embedded in a historical pattern of racial prejudice, division and separation. The relational approach analyses migrant-citizen interactions on the intrapersonal, interpersonal and intergroup level. Relationships are continuously self-organised in the course of human interaction. The focus (or punctuation) of the discussion should therefore be stated clearly. African Migrants expressed an intense emotional impact on the intrapersonal level following their interactions with South African citizens. South African citizens displayed dominant in-group behaviour by ignoring and excluding migrants and by treating them differently. Citizens also regarded migrants as threats. The findings have serious implications for South Africa's diverse racial groups, who interact daily in different interpersonal contexts.**

*Keywords: citizens, interactions, intergroup, interpersonal, intrapersonal, relational, migrants, prejudice, xenophobia*

In 2008, severe xenophobic attacks erupted in South Africa as a result of civic tension caused by poor service delivery by the government. Black African migrants, who came to South Africa to find employment, for better job opportunities, or to further their education, or as refugees, became the victims of rage and violence. The incidents in that year marked a new dimension of xenophobia as it was the first time and highest pick of black South Africans turning against black African migrants in response to their discontent with the government's delivery (Dodson, 2010; Nell, 2009; Steenkamp, 2009). Many of migrants were severely beaten, some were burnt alive, and some of the women were raped. More than 60 migrants were killed (Burns & Mohapatra, 2008; Dodson, 2010; Nell, 2009). The migrants' houses and businesses were destroyed, leaving several thousand homeless (McConeill, 2009; Steenkamp, 2009). Many were also subjected to verbal slights and insults (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010; Neocosmos, 2008). As the attacks escalated around the country, many migrants sought refuge in churches and police stations (Vromans, Schweitzer, Knoetze, & Kageed, 2011). Today, xenophobia is still rife in some parts of South Africa, and African migrants continue to be murdered and discriminated against by their fellow black South Africans (Kruger & Osman, 2010; Mashaba, 2011).

Xenophobia, according to Crush and Pendleton (2007), is defined as hatred or fear of foreigners and strangers ('the

other'), which can be expressed in murder, violence, discrimination, verbal abuse and public hostility by residents towards migrants. The consequences of xenophobia are well described in the literature, yet an explanation of the phenomenon from a relational approach focusing on the interaction between black South African citizens and black migrants has not been widely researched (Dodson, 2010; Nell, 2009; Steenkamp, 2009).

## **The Relational Approach**

The relational approach focuses on the emotional experiences of what transpires between people on the interpersonal (Lazarus, 2006) and group level. The emotional experiences are what Vorster (2011) refers to as the impact that people identify consciously or unconsciously, but to which they always react (Hargie 2011). The emotional impact is the first level of analysis and directs the attention of the observer to what is being communicated (verbally or non-verbally) between interacting people or between groups of people. The group level refers to the categorisation of people in terms of their group membership (physical or symbolic groups) and group dynamics (De Wet, 2005).

Human interactions are always circular and consist of continuous actions and reactions (Lazarus, 2006; Malzahn, 2011; Roos, 2013). A relational approach recognises this circularity in human interaction (Hargie, 2011; Lazarus, 2006; Vorster, 2011). It is therefore necessary, when interactions between people are inves-

tigated, to state clearly the person or group from whose perspective the analysis will be conducted, in this instance the African migrants. The intrapersonal level (emotional experiences) is used to explain what is happening on the interpersonal or the group level. According to general systems theory, deductions can be made about the patterns of the systems, based on observations of parts of the system's functioning (Gratrell, 2005; Green & McDermott, 2010). Systems theory also allows for first- and second-order observations (Higginbotham, Albrecht, & Connor, 2001).

The three levels of interaction (intrapersonal, interpersonal and group) always take place within a specific interpersonal context that determines the meaning of all communication and behaviour in that context (Hargie, 2011; Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson, 2011). The particular interpersonal contexts in which the interactions between African migrants and South African citizens took place are embedded in broader social, environmental and political settings.

### Socio-Political Environment

The xenophobic violence and the interactions between black South African citizens and black migrants should be understood within the socio-political environment of South Africa's Apartheid history of racial classification according to which a minority group of white people held political power in the sense that they were a more powerful group and could take powerful decisions (Onah, 2008; Posel, 2001). In line with group dynamics the resources were more to the benefit of the in-group than to the out-group. The principle of 'us' versus 'them', with its resultant psycho-social phenomena of stereotyping, distancing and isolating, was actively enhanced (McAdams, 1995). These circumstances had lasting consequences for all facets of social existence and were evident, inter alia, on the levels of personal friendships, cultural groupings, sport and recreation at home and in the workplace, and in academic institutions and politics. Vally and Dalamba (1999) stated: "An important legacy of apartheid is that it has succeeded in instilling hostility and fear into the hearts and minds of the population. This is not exclusive to white or black people. Members from both racial groups have fears, anxieties and misgivings towards each other" (p. 5). Various attempts, ranging from peaceful negotiation to escalating violence, were made to address the injustices and inequalities (Adam, 1995; Posel, 2001). Majority black rule was achieved in 1994 following fully democratic elections and this created high expectations among the black South African citizens. They fully expected to have the political and socio-economic opportunities they had been longing and had fought for (Burns & Mohapatra, 2008; Peberdy, 2001).

The transition to democracy in 1994 also led many black migrants from other parts of Africa flock to South Africa in search of employment. These migrants believed that they could share in the new freedom and opportunities after the end of apartheid (Dodson, 2010; Nell, 2009; Vale, 2002). However, as the years went by following political transition, many black South Africans continued to be disadvantaged and to live in poverty (McConnell, 2009). Continuing economic disempowerment made survival increasingly difficult for the majority of the black South Africans under the new government (Adam, 1995; Onah, 2008). As expectations of service delivery for all continued to rise while acute inequalities and deprivation persevered, tension and violence among black South Africans began to increase (Burns & Mohapatra, 2008). What remains unclear is what transpires on an interpersonal or group level between black migrants and black South African citizens. This would

clarify our understanding of the escalating patterns of violence ending in xenophobic attacks.

### Aim of the Study

This study was part of a larger international research project that was conducted in 2009 on African migrants who had migrated to South Africa, France and United Kingdom for different reasons (to find employment, or to better their education or for better job opportunities or as refugees). The initial study set out to explore the existence of typical and diversified migration journeys through the lived experiences of a selection of participants across the three countries. In the present study, involving 44 participants from the larger project, secondary data analysis was applied to identify a research area distinct from that of the larger initial international research study (Grinyer, 2009; Heaton, 2004). The analysis of secondary data taken from existing data sets of the initial larger study yielded interpretations and conclusions that differed from the present study (Gladstone, Volpe & Boydell, 2007). Raw data collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews of African migrants who were living in South Africa at the time of the international study were used in the present study. In this study new research questions and theoretical perspectives which are clearly different from the large initial study were employed (Heaton, 2004). The following question guided the present study: What is the emotional impact of the interactions between African migrants and the black South African citizens that will inform our understanding of the interpersonal and/or group level of interactions in the context of xenophobia? It is hoped that the findings of the study will assist in planning intervention strategies that facilitate positive interpersonal relations between African migrants and black South Africans as well as contributing to the literature of migration.

## Method

### Research Context and Participants

Participants were African migrants who resided in two different provinces in South Africa, the North West Province and Gauteng. The 44 participants, including men and women aged between 18 and 50 years, were purposively recruited for the study were from different African countries, including Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Botswana, Nigeria, Uganda and Ghana.

### Procedure and Data Gathering

Ethical approval for the initial larger research project study was obtained from North-West University's Ethics Committee (05K14). The informed consent form was in English as all participants were able to express themselves in that language. Data for the larger research project were gathered through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Participants were 20 migrants who participated in the focus group discussions and 24 individual participants who participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were captured by means of audiotapes and field notes.

**Focus group discussions.** Migrants from Zimbabwe and Mozambique – men and women between 18 and 50 years participated in the focus group discussions. These took place in the North West Province in the town Rustenburg. The participants were split into two groups of ten each. Questions that guided the focus group discussions included were: *How difficult was it on your first arrival to South Africa?*

**Semi-structured interviews.** These were conducted individually and a person-centred approach was used to ensure that participants received respect and support as well as flexible individualised service to enable them to talk about their experiences without fear and anxiety as this was a sensitive topic (Wilkins, Pollock, Rochon, & Law, 2001). The interviews were conducted with 24 participants (13 men and 11 women) in Johannesburg in the Gauteng Province. Each of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The participants were asked to explain their experiences of xenophobia in South Africa.

### Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was conducted. Recurring words were coded and incidents in the transcripts and field notes were placed in appropriate categories (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990). The coding helped the researcher to understand the relationship between the categories as well as the phenomenon to which they related (Niewenhuis, 2007). The categorised codes were then combined into themes, which, were defined to present the essence of what had been captured. The subthemes, which were supported by the verbatim responses of the participants, were identified to give structure to the main themes. The main themes and subthemes were then organised into a coherent pattern.

Crystallisation was used as a way of achieving research depth through compilation of details and application of different methods of presenting data and analysis (Ellingson, 2009). As this was a secondary analysis the researchers provided background information about the previous initial study so that readers could understand the present study. A combination of various methods of data analysis with the literature and theories was also employed in the present study. Themes were supported by the participants' verbatim responses. The reflections of the researcher were recorded continuously in the form of journal notes during the research process.

## Findings

The findings will be presented as short case studies to illustrate the relational experiences of African migrants in specific interpersonal encounters. The emotional impact on the migrants will be used to explain the interactions between them and local citizens on an intrapersonal, interpersonal or group level. The findings are reported without an indication of the contribution of the migrants to their impact in the interaction. Only patterns of the interactions are described from the perspective of the migrants.

### Intrapersonal Level

The feelings of two migrants from Zimbabwe will be used as examples.

A Zimbabwean migrant said: *I really felt left out and lost. The interactions took place in the context of a team dinner: I went to a team dinner; the whites were speaking Afrikaans. When I moved to the blacks, they were also speaking in their own language which I could not understand. All of them expected me to be able to speak in their own language.*

Another migrant from Zimbabwe expressed her emotional experience as follows: *It was terrible. I was shocked. The interpersonal context in which the interactions with South African citizens took place was a shopping trip with her friends and her mother: One day we were shopping with my mother. We went into a shop and we were speaking our language (Shona). And,*

*you know what, the woman who is the owner actually threw us out of her shop, because we were Zimbabweans.*

### Interpersonal and Group Level

The emotional impact and the content of the messages in the interactions were used to determine the level of further analysis, whether interpersonal (between people) or on the inter-group level. The findings indicated that all the African migrants who participated in the research were judged mainly on their group membership as migrants, irrespective of the context in which the interactions take place or their individual merits. Four dominant themes emerged: 1) Migrants are ignored; 2) Migrants are excluded by South African citizens' use of language; 3) Migrants are seen as threats; and 4) Migrants are treated as different.

**Migrants are ignored.** Migrants are ignored even though interpersonal contexts demand different behaviour. For example, a migrant from Mozambique related how she had been treated by healthcare professionals: *I went to the clinic for treatment one day. I arrived very early in the morning. The nurse told me to go outside and wait until they call me. Many South Africans who came after me were treated first. I was just outside at the bench waiting for my turn. Later in the afternoon that's when they called me inside to receive the treatment.*

A migrant from Malawi described how he was also ignored, in different contexts: *When you ride in the taxi, they do not talk to you. When you go into the shops they do not want to help you.*

**Migrants are excluded from interactions.** Exclusion from interactions was experienced when citizens spoke languages the migrants did not understand. See the first example, which was not only limited to the Zimbabwean migrant. A migrant from Malawi related his experience of a similar situation: *I attended another party. There were many South Africans speaking different languages, Xhosa, Tswana, Zulu and Afrikaans. Each group I tried to join, asked [me] why don't you learn Xhosa; another group will also ask me so can you speak, Tswana?*

**Migrants seen as threats.** The responses of many of the African migrants revealed how South African citizens and security forces perceived them as threats. A migrant from Ghana explained his experiences when citizens perceived him as a personal threat: *At the university where I am studying, some people are nice, but some are afraid of me. They quickly lock their doors when you walk across them. I'm not a tsotsi (criminal), but they treat me like one, and I don't understand why. Is it because I'm a foreigner? I will never do anything against the law ... it's like they don't know.*

A black migrant who is a professional nurse from Zimbabwe told how she was regarded as a threat by citizens: *One day this frantic old lady started screaming that I should go home, that I am stealing her sons and daughters and their jobs. Another example involved a young boy: He was about 15 years, and he asked me why I am living here while some people don't like me. He also said: you are not from here, [and] you come and take my dad's work. A migrant from Mozambique told a similar story: One day the other man saw me watching the cars ... he told me I am stealing his job; I asked him if he wants to watch the cars as well, but he said no it pays too little, I cannot do such a job.*

A young migrant from Nigeria reported being manhandled by the police for driving an expensive model: *[The police] ... pulled me out of the car and told me to lie on the ground with my hands behind my back pointing a gun at me.*

A migrant from Zimbabwe in a taxi overheard how South African citizens talked about Zimbabweans: *They [the*

Zimbabweans] are poor money-hungry people and just want to destroy their country.

**Migrants are treated as different.** A Malawian migrant said: *When [I am] standing in a queue together with other South Africans, for example in a traffic queue, they will say "Hey you, I mean you", and you will see that he is looking at my complexion.* Another migrant (participant) from Zimbabwe spoke about a similar experience in his work context: *At the hospital [where] I work, I sometimes have a few patients that will ask me where I am from, because they can hear and see I'm not from SA, and then I would tell them.*

According to a migrant from Mozambique: *When we meet somewhere talking in our language, they know that this is a foreigner, we cannot run away from it neither can we hide from them, so I explain to them that yes I am a foreigner and legal. I did not come here to cause problems. I came here to look for job and support my family.*

### Discussion of Findings

The emotional experiences of African migrants in relation to South African citizens demonstrated the severity of antagonism of black South African citizens as a group towards migrants. From the migrants' perspective, they were not treated as individuals, but regarded as part of an out-group, solely on the basis of their group membership as migrants. The South African citizens used the interactions to demonstrate their dominance. Migrants were ignored and excluded from interactions by means of language. They were discriminated against in subtle ways and sometimes very overtly, based on their belonging to a group that is perceived as threatening to the in-group, the South African citizens. Group dominance was also observed when the citizens belittled the migrants and when they treated them as scapegoats.

Group theory explains that belonging to a group could result in distorted perceptions, both in terms of physical and social observations, which Tajfel (1982) called the 'accentuation' effect. The distorted perceptions of South Africans are fuelled by the media and contribute to inflexible generalisations. This, according to De Wet (2005), is regarded as prejudice. The function of prejudice in this context was to act primarily as a survival strategy for groups.

Groups tended to organise themselves according to certain predictable patterns which play an important role in the maintenance and enhancement of prejudice. The power of group norms in a cohesive unit can both cause and maintain prejudice in that group. Norms that permit a group to exclude people based on their cultural group membership allow generalisations based on an identifiable category. This actively increases prejudice. Furthermore, it seems that the high levels of cohesion between black South Africa citizens can lead to the exclusion of people based on their differentness. Members of the 'us' group (the in-group) would be seen as the same, while 'they' (the out-group) would be perceived as different. This tendency can actually escalate a process of distorted perceptions concerning non-members. Non-members or migrants become the 'enemy' which can even increase the cohesive forces in a group, promoting an escalating circle of inhumane behaviour, such as xenophobia.

Migrants were also perceived as threats to the resources of South African citizens. Groups who compete for resources, or who perceive a threat, become more aggressive, competitive,

barbaric and greedy towards other groups (Baron & Byrne, 2003).

The findings have serious implications for the diverse populations' interactions in South Africa. The racial divide seems to be entrenched in the history of South Africa in the sense that the people in South Africa were conditioned to think in terms of groups. The racial divide will probably be exuberated in South Africa because of the norm to think about people in terms of their group membership and not as individuals. In the words of a migrant from Botswana: *To be quite honest, I never really thought about my colour or my race until I came to South Africa. Here I was made aware that I am black and a foreigner.* This migrant's reflections revealed that he did not think about people in terms of their group membership.

### Recommendations and Limitations

De Wet (2005) indicated that people should be seen as individuals in interpersonal contexts. It is therefore recommended that structured intervention programmes be planned and implemented in communities in which the highest incidences of xenophobia occurred or are still manifesting. In these interventions, the powerful impact of group dynamics should be recognised. Group sessions with key role players in the community might be identified to attend group sessions, facilitated by therapists equipped to deal with group dynamics. In these sessions, participants may be offered opportunities to learn principles of co-operation, cohesion, trust, and empathy.

### Conclusion

The relational experiences between the African migrants and the black South African citizens are expressed as emotions which are used to explain the interactions on an interpersonal and group level. Racial interactions in South Africa are embedded in the historical patterns of racial prejudice. On an interpersonal level, migrants are ignored, excluded and treated as different from South African citizens. Membership of the migrant group elicits emotional reactions in South Africans and activates prejudice and group dynamics. South African citizens displayed dominant in-group behaviour and escalating patterns of inhumane references to African migrants were observed. Xenophobia is the escalating pattern of inter-group violence in which people are not recognised as individuals but treated as a group that poses a threat to resources. Group interventions on a community level are recommended to promote individual interactions in which people from different groups recognise one another as human beings.

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